Respectable 'illegality': Gangs, masculinities and belonging in a Nairobi ghetto

van Stapele, N.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Respectable ‘Illegality':
Gangs, Masculinities and Belonging
in a Nairobi Ghetto

This picture shows the ‘One Touch’ distillation site. This picture was taken by me, Naomi van Stapele, in May 2012

By Naomi van Stapele
Respectable ‘Illegality':
Gangs, Masculinities and Belonging in a Nairobi Ghetto

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor

aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam

op gezag van de Rector Magnificus

prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,

in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel

op vrijdag 24 april 2015, te 10:00 uur

door

Naomi van Stapele

geboren te Rotterdam
Promotiecommissie

Promotor(es): Prof. Dr. P.L. Geschiere, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Copromotor(es): Dr. C.L.A. Willemse, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam

Overige leden: Prof. Dr. A.C.A.E. Moors, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Prof. Dr. M.P.J. van de Port, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Prof. Dr. A.A. van Stipriaan Luiscius, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam

Dr. R. Spronk, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Dr. J.A.W. Nyairo, Retired Scholar, Moi University, Kenya

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| MUNGIKI IN MATHARE | 1 |
| 'DISCOVERING' WORKING GANGS | 4 |
| WORKING GANGS AND VOLATILE LINKS TO 'ETHNICITY' | 6 |
| STRUGGLES OVER MANHOOD | 8 |
| DOMINANT REPRESENTATIONS OF GANGS IN KENYA | 10 |
| SOCIAL NAVIGATION: MAKING CHOICES WHILE FACING CONSTANT UNCERTAINTIES | 14 |
| ANALYSING MY DATA: BIOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES 'AGAINST THE GRAIN' | 16 |
| BUILDING TRUST | 19 |
| STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK | 23 |

### CHAPTER 1: MAPPING PEOPLE, PLACES AND POWER IN BONDENI, A NEIGHBOURHOOD IN THE NAIROBI GHETTO MATHARE. | 25 |
| INTRODUCTION | 25 |
| ARRIVING IN BONDENI | 26 |
| GOING DOWN | 27 |
| WALKING TO THE BRIDGE | 31 |
| A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME | 33 |
| EMERGING CLASS DIVISIONS BETWEEN UPPER AND LOWER BONDENI | 36 |
| LANDOWNERS AND AUTHORITY STRUCTURES IN BONDENI | 40 |
| ALCOHOL, MONEY AND POWER | 43 |
| KIKUYU VERSUS LUO GHETTO VILLAGES? | 46 |
| ON IMAGINING RICH KIKUYU AND POOR LUO | 50 |
| THE RISE OF ETHNIC-BASED GANGS IN MATHARE | 53 |
| CONCLUSION | 56 |

### CHAPTER 2: JOINING A WORKING GANG: ON LOCALITY, MEMBERSHIP AND WORK. | 57 |
| INTRODUCTION | 57 |
| RESPECTABLE 'ILLEGALITY' | 57 |
| THE IMPACT OF THE LEGALISATION OF CHANG'AA | 59 |
| GROWING UP WITH CHANG'AA | 62 |
| GOING BACK TO CHANG'AA | 63 |
| THE FIRST ALCOHOL GANG: INDEPENDENCE AND INNOVATION | 64 |
| BETWEEN OPTIONS AND RISKS | 66 |
| BELONGING TO A BAZE AND GANG MEMBERSHIP | 68 |
| LOCALITY, FAMILY AND FORMATION PROCESSES OF WORKING GANG | 69 |
| BROTHERHOOD AND BUSINESS | 71 |
| OTHER PATHWAYS TO GANG MEMBERSHIP | 72 |
| NON-MEMBERSHIP: OLDER MEN AND WOMEN | 74 |
| GANGS AS AGE-SETS | 76 |
| FROM CRIMINAL TO RESPECTED GANG MEMBER | 77 |
| CIRCUMCISION AND PEER PRESSURE AMONG GANG MEMBERS | 79 |
| CONCLUSION | 83 |

### CHAPTER 3: LEAVING THE GANG: MASCULINITIES, MIND-SETS AND MARRIAGES. | 85 |
| INTRODUCTION | 85 |
| ASPIRING TO LEAVE | 86 |
| GROUP TRAJECTORIES TO LEAVE THE GANG | 87 |
| POSITIONS OF MANHOOD: ON HUSTLERS AND FOOLS | 89 |
| TRAPPED IN JUNIOR MANHOOD | 92 |
| EVERYDAY DRINKING AND GIVING UP | 95 |
| SOCIAL HORIZON AND LIVING IN THE NOW | 99 |
| EVALUATING THE PROGRAMME | 102 |
| A SUCCESSFUL TRAJECTORY | 103 |
CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................. 217
RESPECTABLE 'ILLEGALITY' .................................................................................. 217
ANXIOUS MEN ......................................................................................................... 221
THE JEALOUS NEIGHBOUR ................................................................................... 226
LOOKING FOR SCOPES OF RESISTANCE ................................................................. 230
BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................ 235
SUMMARY ................................................................................................................ 267
SAMENVATTING ...................................................................................................... 273
**Different Maps of Nairobi, Mathare and the different ghetto villages**

1 The maps enclosed are all taken from Google maps, and they are intentionally a bit vague. For safety reasons I have not been able to include maps that show more details on, for instance, the exact location of certain sites, such as distilling spots near the river or hang-outs of gang members. Safety issues also hampered me to draw the route I describe in Chapter 1 on a map for this also may expose the location of certain sites. What’s more, I have done extensive research on processes of boundary-making with different research participants, however, for similar reasons I could also not represent these impressions and, often conflicting, experiences of boundaries (for instance of certain ghetto villages or gang hangouts).
Map 3: The different administrative wards in Mathare, Nairobi. The different neighbourhood areas in Mathare where I conducted research were Bondeni and Kosovo. Bondeni is in Mabatini Ward, and Kosovo is in Hospital Ward.

Map 4: The location of the different ghetto villages in Mathare, Nairobi, at focus in this thesis: Bondeni, Kosovo, Shantit, 4B and 4A.
Map 5: A close-up from Bondeni Village, in Mathare, Nairobi.
Abbreviations

AP – Administrative Police
CBO – Community-Based Organisation
CSO – Civil Society Organisation
GSU – General Service Unit (Military Police)
ICC – International Criminal Court
KADU – Kenya African Democratic Union
KANU – Kenya African National Union
MYSA – Mathare Youth Sports Association
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
NHIF – National Health Insurance Fund
ODM – Orange Democratic Union
PNU – Party of National Unity
List of Sheng, Kiswahili and Kikuyu words used in this Thesis

Ashu – Ten in Sheng
Ball – Pregnancy in Sheng
Bazes – Networks of friends and the locality of their hangout in Sheng
Godfathers – Big men in Sheng
Biko – The first 15 litres of illegally distilled alcohol
Boostah – To get energy or courage in Sheng
Busaa – Fermented maize porridge in Kiswahili
Cham – Illegally distilled alcohol in Sheng
Chang’aa – Illegally distilled alcohol in Kiswahili
Chapati – A type of Indian bread that is very popular in Kenya
Chini ya maji – Under the surface in Kiswahili
Conda – Tout in Sheng
Damu – Blood in Kiswahili
Dawa – Medicine in Kiswahili
Eastlando – Eastlands in Sheng
Fala – A fool in Sheng
Float – A way of saying that someone does not understand something in Sheng
Geri – Gang, groups of men who are engaged in robbery, both in and outside the ghetto in Sheng
Gishage – Ancestral land or family land in the rural area in the Kikuyu language
Grouo – An open field in Sheng
Gunia – A large sack to carry groceries with in Kiswahili
Hard core – Hard ghetto living in Sheng
Hema ya Ngai wi Mwoyo – ‘Tent of the Living God’ in Kikuyu language
Hongo – Bribe in Sheng
Hosi – Hospital in Sheng
Hotelli – A small roadside restaurant in Kiswahili
Ituika – A generational transformation of power
Janjess – Streetsmart
Jazaa numba – Add or fill the number in Sheng
Jiko – A kitchen fire in Kiswahili
Jua kali – Informal, roadside businesses, ‘hot son’, in Kiswahili
Juju – Witchcraft in Sheng
Ka sonko – A small boss in Sheng
Kamjesh – A youth helping to lure passengers into the matatu front in line in Sheng
Kamjeshi – Groups of young men who control and provide security at bus stops and public transport routes for a fee in Sheng
Kangara or kango – Distillation mixture in Sheng
Kangas – Colourfully printed clothes for women in Kiswahili
Kikoy shirts – Embroidered and woven cotton shirts for men
Karao – A policeman in Sheng
Kude?...kude! – Try or die in Sheng
Kuhustle – Short-term income-generating activity in Sheng
Kukaa rada – To stay alert in Sheng/ Kisiwahili
Kumi – Ten in Kisiwahili
Kung’ang’ana – to struggle in Kisiwahili
Kuraha – To have fun in Sheng
Kurank – To rank in Sheng
Kuruka – Jump in Kisiwahili and leave in Sheng
Kuwaonyesha picha poa – To show them a good picture in Sheng
Kuweka chumvi – To put salt, to exaggerate, in Kisiwahili
Lala chini – Lie face down on the ground in Kisiwahili/Sheng
Leo ni leo, kesho ni baadaye – Today is today and tomorrow is later in Kisiwahili
Livest – Prone to enjoy life in Sheng
Mabani – Nasty, mean people/informers in Sheng and Kisiwahili
Mabati – Iron sheet in Kisiwahili
Mabeshte – Peers or friends in Sheng
Maboyz – Young men from the ghetto in Sheng
Madigaga – Glasses in Sheng
Mafala – ‘fools’ in Sheng and Kisiwahili
Magondi – Plural for thief in Sheng
Majanja – Street wise hustlers in Sheng
Majeshi – Armies in Kisiwahili
Majuu – The West in Sheng
Matanga – A funeral fund raising meeting in Kisiwahili
Matatu – Minibus in Kisiwahili
Mara hiyo hiyo – Instantly in Sheng
Masonko – Rich people or bosses in Sheng
Matanga – A funeral fund raising meeting in Kisiwahili
Matatu – Minibus in Kisiwahili
Mathare, ni rahisi kuingia na ni ngumu kutoka – It is easy to enter Mathare and hard to leave in Kisiwahili
Mazishi – A funeral in Kisiwahili
Mazungumzo mtaani – Neighbourhood conversations in Kisiwahili
Mbabi – A youth who live a wealthy and trendy lifestyle in Sheng
Mbao – 20 Kenyan Shillings in Sheng
Mbeshte – A friend in Sheng
Mbuzi – Goat in Kisiwahili
Mgeni – Visitor in Kiswahili
Mgondi – Thief in Sheng
Miraa – Khat in Kiswahili
Mitaro – Sewers in Kiswahili
Mitush – Second-hand clothes in Sheng
Mjanja – Hustler in Sheng
Mlami – White person in Sheng
Moja moja tu – Individuals in (broken) Kiswahili
Msako – A police raid in Sheng
Mtaa – Ghetto in Sheng
Mwenyeji – A local person in Kiswahili
Mzaliwa – Native in Kiswahili
Ndebe – Metal bucket in Kiswahili
Ngutu – Sugar waste in Kiswahili
Nyen chom – Roasted meat in Sheng
Nyumba Kumi – Ten Houses in Kiswahili
Ocha – The rural area in Sheng
Pangas – Machetes in Kiswahili
Peremba – Pickpocket in Sheng (Kiswahili word)
Pesa – Money in Kiswahili
Pili pili – Hot peppers in Kiswahili
Punk – Rich and trendy youth in Sheng
Jodo – A shaved head in Sheng
Riika – Age group in the Kikuyu language
Roundi hii – This time in Sheng
Rowe – Near the river in the Kikuyu language
Rungu – A club in Kiswahili
Shamba – Vegetable garden in Kiswahili
Shosho – Grandmother in Sheng
Sonko – Boss in Sheng
Sukuma – A tough kind of kale in Kiswahili (‘push the week’)
Tao – City in Sheng
Thaay, or sometimes Thaayo – Peace in the Kikuyu language (a religious group)
Ufala – Foolishness in Sheng
Ugali – Porridge of maize meal in Kiswahili
Ujanja or ujanjess – Street smartness in Sheng
Uji – Gruel or porridge made with water in Kiswahili
Unga – Maize meal in Kiswahili
Vibarua – Day labour (pl.) in Kiswahili
Wadosi – Wealthy people in Sheng
Wageni – Visitors in Kiswahili
Wagondi – Thieves in Sheng
Walevi – Drunkards in Kiswahili
Wasee wa down – People who live near the river down in Mathare in Sheng
Wasee wa esto – People who live in stone houses in formally planned neighbourhoods in Sheng
Wasee wa ghetto – Young men from the ghetto in Sheng
Wasee wa rowe – Men from the riverside in Sheng
Wazaliwa – Natives in Kiswahili
Wazee – Old men in Kiswahili
Wazee wa kijiji – The Council of Village Elders in Kiswahili
Westi – Westlands in Sheng
Look into my eyes,
Tell me what you see?
Can you feel my pain? Am I your enemy?
Give us a better way, things are really bad,
The only friend I know, is this gun I have.
Listen to my voice, this is not a threat
Now you see the nine, are you worried yet?
You've been talking 'bout you want the war to cease
But when you show us hope, we will show you peace

Look down on my shoes, can you see my toes?
The struggle that we live, nobody really knows
Stop and ask yourself, would you live like that?
And if you had to then, wouldn't you bus gun shot?

Look into my house would you live in there?
Look me in the eyes and tell me that you care,
Well, I've made up my mind to end up in the morgue
Right now I'd rather die, cause man a live like dog

Look into my mind, can you see the wealth?
Can you tell that I want to help myself?
But if it happen that, I stick you for your ring
Don't be mad at me, it's a survival ting.
Look into my heart, I can feel your fear
Take another look, can you hold my stare?
Why are you afraid of my hungry face?
Or is it this thing bulging in my waist?

(Bounty Killer, 1999)

This book is dedicated to the thousands of young men in Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos who have died of a police bullet since 2002.
Acknowledgements

For safety reasons I cannot individually express my deep gratitude to many of my loved ones in Kenya and in The Netherlands who made this book happen. You know who you are, and without you I would not be me, my profound love for you all is beyond words.

This book would also not have become a reality if Dr. Karin Willemse had not consistently encouraged me to engage in and continue with academic research since my first self-doubting steps during my BA thesis. For over a decade now, she has been my mentor, supervisor and role model. I can only wish to continue to learn from you. Your inspiring guidance was matched with the highly expert, very kind and deeply thorough supervision provided by my main supervisor Prof. Dr. Peter Geschiere. You both enabled me to consistently rise above my own expectations. Your support, insightful comments, patience and advice have not just laid the foundation for this book but also for my further academic career. I count myself lucky to have worked with such an inspiring, wise, caring and encouraging supervision team.

I would also like to thank the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (The AISSR) from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) for accepting me as a Ph.D. candidate; it was a dream come true. More specifically, I would like to thank the program group ‘Globalizing Cultures and the Quest for Belonging: Ethnographies of the Everyday’ for solid advice and inspiring seminars. Among its staff, I would like to especially thank Dr. Rachel Spronk for much needed encouragement, insightful feedback and cherished sharing. I would also like to thank my fellow Ph.D candidates at the AISSR, my unforgettable friends from the Anthropologists Anonymous and all my other Ph.D colleagues with whom I taught, read, wrote and thought. Among these wonderful colleagues I would like to separately name my friend of almost two decades, Paul Mepschen, for making it easy to begin, interesting to continue and mandatory to finish. Thank you for your inspiration and friendship. Lidewyde Berckmoes and Jonna Both too have to be named and thanked, as well as the entire Children and Youth group and Professor Ria Reis: for collective passions, shared theoretical challenges and mutual engagements. I hope we will continue to eat, read and meet together. I also would like to thank Professor Mirjam de Bruijn for creating opportunities and spaces for innovative thinking that will hopefully extend far into the future.

I also would like to thank the entire AISSR secretariat, and especially Janus Oomen, and the secretariat of the Sociology and Anthropology department of the UvA, especially Muriël Kiesel, for amazing institutional support.

Anouk Hupkes and Anick Vollebergh, my two paranymfs, my two best friends, one old, one new. You picked me up when I was in a thousand pieces, traumatized and lost. You gave me the strength to learn with a broken heart, to write and think my way out of despair and make sense of what sometimes felt senseless. Your originality, creativity and sharp minds, both in such different but equally enthusing ways, leave me in awe, and I am intensely grateful for you two in my life.

With you I came into this world, you first, I followed. My twin, when I say these words, my heart fills up; there are no words to describe our bond. Saul van Stapele, I still am proud to follow you, learn from you. This book is partly you because of what we share,
not just our past, present and future, but our whole being in this world.

My parents, Peter van Stapele and Gudy Schilte, raised me to take diversity as the starting point of life and love, to always look further, explore and question so called ‘truths’, and, most importantly, to stand with the oppressed. I can only hope to have honoured that with this book. Lida Dijkema took me and my brother to Kenya when we were 15, and her courage, guidance and sense of what really matters in life made me go back and back and back again for over 25 years now. You gave me strength to believe in myself, to not let my past determine my future and to always, always be honest.

My dear sisters, my other brother Caio and all my other friends, thank you for accepting me for who I am, half in Kenya, half in the Netherlands and always busy with work. Your understanding and encouragement means the world to me.

There are so many more people I have to express my deep gratitude to. Among these I would like to highlight a few more. Tine Davids, thank you so much for also being a role model and an inspirational thinker. Francio Guadeloupe, thank you for your absolute commitment to one-ness, and for showing us how we can think about and with humanity beyond divisions. To my new role models (I know … I have many), Lorraine Nencel and Ida Sabelis, for believing in me and guiding me into new fields of research, I hope it is the beginning of a long journey together. Mary Tupan, I admire you so much for your wisdom and commitment, and thank you for understanding that I needed to follow my heart.
Introduction

This book is about gangs in Nairobi’s ghettos, in particular why young men feel they have to become a member of a gang, how gang membership becomes crucial in their struggle for survival and why it is so difficult for them to leave a gang, even though many are trying to. My aim is to move away from the current association of gangs with violence and ethnic politics – that is gang members as ‘thugs for hire.’ One of my main discoveries was that work is at least as important to grasp processes of gang formation, especially if one wants to understand the gangs from the young men’s own perspective. This is a viewpoint that is lacking in much of the literature on Nairobi gangs in particular and, indeed, gangs in general. Gangs are vital to many young men from the ghetto, because they offer work and, as such, a chance to realise respectable masculinities in an environment that is increasingly dominated by women. In this sense, gangs can even be instrumental in realising community development. However, there are enormous barriers in the ghetto environment to achieving masculinities and development. This explains why the gangs under consideration here are so fluid in their existence and why membership is always wrought with ambiguities. A brief description of the changing circumstances of my research in a Nairobi ghetto can help to explain how I arrived at this emphasis on work and masculinities.

Mungiki in Mathare

I started conducting research on gangs in 1998, and over the past 16 years have observed the rise and fall of many different groups in Mathare, a Nairobi ghetto. In this period, gangs with a strong Kikuyu profile called Mungiki emerged in Nairobi. Indeed, between 2001 and 2007, Mungiki gangs controlled different neighbourhood areas in Mathare. Among these were the two ghetto villages where I conducted my research: Bondeni and Kosovo (see Map 4). Bondeni was famous for the distillation of illegal alcohol, which is a highly lucrative business, as this book will show, while most of the heroin dealers I worked with lived in Kosovo. However, despite dominant perceptions (e.g. Mutahi 2011:14), Mungiki gangs ceased to operate in November 2006 in their former strongholds in Mathare after angry residents ousted them with the help of Taliban gangs from Bondeni (BBC 2006; Gettleman 2006). The Taliban gangs had a strong Luo profile, were loosely affiliated with local politicians, and were named after the Afghan Taliban. These groups actually had no relation to the Afghan Taliban, but allegedly used this geo-political reference to underscore their toughness and position as the ‘underdog’ (see Chapter 6). In

1 Mathare is a word in the Kikuyu language that denotes ‘Dracaena trees’, and this name probably alluded to the variety of trees that were spotted throughout the valley before it became a ghetto (MuST 2012).
2 Local residents preferred the term ghetto to slum or informal settlement, because of the derogatory connotations the latter had in their eyes. In this book, I adopt the popular usage of the word ghetto to refer to informal neighbourhoods; these are residential areas that are not state-planned and, thus, lack any government services. These ghettos were subdivided into smaller localities, dubbed ‘ghetto villages’ in the local language Sheng (see footnote 10).
3 The lack of strongholds in Mathare did not, however, withstand the powers of the Mungiki gangs in other Nairobi neighbourhoods, such as Kayole, or the presence of individual Mungiki gang members inside Mathare, many of whom still had relatives living there. Yet, these gangs had long been surpassed in this particular locality when I embarked on my fieldwork for this research project in December 2007.
June 2007, the military police expelled the Mungiki gangs from Kosovo, which was their last bastion in Mathare (The New York Times 2007). In this book, I refer to both Mungiki and Taliban gangs as 'ethnic-based gangs', because of their strong ethnic profiles and concomitant political affiliations, however shifting and unexpected these links sometimes were.

In September 2010, one of my main research participants, Kingi from Bondeni, reflected on the persistent standpoint that the Mungiki was still powerful in Mathare. Laughing, he said:

Yah, people say Mungiki is in Mathare, ha ha ha. Mungiki is not here in Mathare, only moja moja tu ['individuals' in Kiswahili], chini ya maji ('under the surface' in Kiswahili). They come from Kayole, that is where they are now ha ha ha, and they even have to hide to visit their parents ha ha ha [...] Mungiki fought chang’aa ('illegally distilled alcohol' in Kiswahili) people, us, they wanted to stop chang’aa, ha ha ha our livelihood, that is our work, how? And in 2006, when they wanted to raise the tax we chased them with help from the Taliban. [...] We can’t allow them back. [...] There are many groups you think are Mungiki, like in Kiamaiko, in Hurush, not the Borana [an ethnic group in Kenya], but the young guys at the businesses for Kikuyu, they act like Mungiki, ask money at the [public transport] route, and people follow because it put fear in you and people [from outside the ghetto] now don’t know who real Mungiki is.

This aptly illustrates the disparity between common views and actual developments on the ground in the ghettos. Sensational media representations of Mungiki gangs have contributed to the myth that they still controlled Mathare long after their demise in 2007. This also shaped the vilification of gangs in general in the dominant discourse in Kenya. Indeed, between 2000 and 2002, different newspaper articles accused the Mungiki movement and its gangs of having shifted from a religious and a more emancipatory focus

---

4 I describe the young men and women who feature in this book as my research participants, because this term best reflects the type of research relationship we developed. They not only shared their life histories with me and allowed me to operate alongside them in their daily lives, but also participated in the analysis process, as explained further below.

5 Most of the narrative texts in this book are represented in the precise wording that my research participants used when uttering them. I was unable to record the discussions I had with them, because they feared that the recordings might fall into the wrong hands and could be used against them. Accordingly, I combined the method of taking condensed notes and writing down exactly what they said during our interviews. Strikingly, most of the research participants preferred to speak English with me during interviews, even though I speak Sheng fluently. However, during our casual conversations, we always spoke Sheng with each other, but their preference to speak English during life history interviews and discussions perhaps partly emanated from the fact that I also included them in analysing the narrative texts, which were written up in English. The English the participants used was heavily laced with Sheng, and their words were often a direct translation of Sheng. I have not sanitised their words to fit English grammar rules, because I am interested in the way they constructed sentences, as this helped me when it came to analysing their individual positioning. A few research participants did speak Sheng throughout our interviews, and, working alongside them, I translated their narrative texts into English. All of my research participants could read English and have read and have commented on the chapters in this book.
to “barbarism and criminality”, using terms such as “shadowy”, “blood thirsty” and “sects” (e.g. Makokha 2000; Onyango 2002). It soon became commonplace to use similar dramatic terms to describe gangs in general, partly because it was difficult for outsiders to differentiate between Mungiki gangs and other groups. This all bolstered the popular image of young and poor men as “thugs for hire”, “ethnically driven” and “dangerous”, not just in media representations, but also in academic work (e.g. Kagwanja 2009:366; Kagwanja & Southall 2009:271; Anderson & Lochery 2008:334). These, and other scholarly works on Kenya, do not often intentionally frame gangs as thugs for hire. Nevertheless, the use of this term in connection with broader political developments without further contextualisation has affirmed this label in the dominant discourse. This discourse in turn shaped the widespread legitimisation of extra-judicial killings of young and poor men by the police, which have become increasingly systematic from 2002 onwards (see also Oscar Foundation 2008).

The reason why the Mungiki gangs attracted so much media and academic attention (see also Rasmussen 2010; Kagwanja 2003, 2005; Frederiksen 2010) partly lies in the dazzling speed with which these groups took over parts of Nairobi and the transport industry between 1998 and 2001. Many people, including me, were taken by surprise by this, and were instantly fascinated by the power, religious and political activities, and strong ethnic profile of these gangs. What intrigued many was the question of why young ghetto men – who had very little knowledge of their Kikuyu background and did not even speak the Kikuyu language – joined Mungiki gangs in large numbers. Moreover, where had these gangs suddenly come from? The Mungiki movement was allegedly founded during the late 1980s to protect squatter communities with a Kikuyu background during the clashes surrounding the 1992 elections in the Rift Valley Province. These clashes were instigated by the Moi government to oust inhabitants with a Kikuyu background from its strongholds, because it was believed that these groups would vote en-masse for opposition parties (Rutten & Owuor 2009:314; KHRC 2001; Akiwumi Report 1999). This violence brought an influx of refugees to urban ghetto areas such as Mathare, and with them came many Mungiki gang leaders. These leaders built alliances with local gangs, and the local Mungiki gangs that were the result began to establish protection rackets in Mathare from 1998 onwards. Many local young men began to foreground their Kikuyu identification to enable them to benefit from the myriad of jobs on offer by these gangs. Within a few years, the gangs controlled half of Mathare and many other ghetto areas in Nairobi, including the

7 The Mungiki movement is a national movement that operates through local cells that I term gangs. It has, often intermittently, been described as a Kikuyu revivalist group, for example by Wamue (2001), and as an urban vigilante group with a strong ethnic profile, for instance by D. Anderson (2002). Strong resemblances with the Hema ya Ngai wi Mwoyo ('Tent of the Living God' in the Kikuyu language – cf. Rogoncho & wa Kariuki 1990; Anderson 2002:531) and Thaay, or sometimes Thaayo, ('peace' in the Kikuyu language), which are both famous Kikuyu religious organisations in Kenya, suggests a connection with them, at least during the movement’s emergence. Other myths of origin link the founding of the Mungiki movement to a group of old Mau Mau fighters in the Rift Valley Province, who called upon a group of ‘grandsons’ – a younger generation of men with Kikuyu backgrounds – to continue to fight for independence because the objectives thereof, such as land, had not yet been achieved. There is probably truth in both of these stories. Many narratives also connect the Mungiki movement to different politicians, but these links probably developed at a later stage.
majority of the public transport routes. They exacted taxes for public transport, the right to distil alcohol, security, electricity, and even access to sanitation. Then, from the 2002 elections onwards, the Mungiki gangs became increasingly and visibly involved in politics\(^8\), which further shaped the public image of the gang members – and of young and poor men in general – as thugs for hire.

'Discovering' working gangs

The Mungiki gang control in Mathare provoked the proliferation of Taliban gangs, as the former tried to push the latter out of the public transport industry. The Taliban gangs started out as *kamjeshi*. In Sheng\(^9\), this term denotes groups of young men who control and provide security at bus stops and public transport routes for a fee. The Taliban gangs had had political affiliations ever since their inception, but their political ties and ethnic profile became more pronounced in their confrontation with the Mungiki gangs over the control of transport routes. These rival groups have frequently fought turf-wars with each other from the early 2000s onwards (Anderson 2002).

During the post-election violence of 2007/8 (see also Waki 2008), the Taliban gangs attempted to take over former Mungiki strongholds in Mathare, while the Mungiki gangs returned to this ghetto to try and stop them. Yet, the latter groups were – again – chased out by the military police. I was in Kenya and observed the post-election violence in Mathare up close. Media representations considered this conflict – in Mathare and other areas where there were clashes – through the lens of ethnic violence and divisive politics, and pointed to young and poor men as the main perpetrators, as thugs for hire (e.g. The Nation Reporter 2008). My analysis is that this violence in Mathare cannot be explained by using the concept of 'political violence' alone, for this notion has strong ethnic connotations in Kenyan political discourse and thus fixes 'ethnicity' as a one-dimensional explanatory model for people to engage in conflict. From a broader historical and a more local perspective, this period of violence can also be taken as another phase in the ongoing turf war between Mungiki and Taliban groups. Moreover, the participants had many different motivations for engaging in this conflict, and were not just driven by political grievances and putative ethnic animosities (Van Stapele 2010), as I will explore in detail in the following chapters. Furthermore, it was not only young and poor men who were involved; women and older men too participated in violence. On the whole, the Taliban groups in Mathare were widely believed by residents to have taken advantage of the power vacuum that was left by the Mungiki gangs. Indeed, between early 2008 and late 2009, I observed

---

\(^8\) President Moi ordered a crackdown on the Mungiki movement in 2000, and meetings of its members were sometimes dispersed with violence by the police, while at other times the police seemed curiously reluctant to interfere (Mugo 2000; The Nation correspondent 2000). The relationship between the Moi government and the Mungiki changed in August 2002. The Kenyan public was shocked to see the movement demonstrate on Nairobi’s streets in support of Moi’s chosen heir, Uhuru Kenyatta (Sunday Nation Team 2002: Kagwanja 2003, 2005). I would like to refer interested (Dutch) readers to an excellent and insightful report on this shift within the Mungiki movement by Karneworff (2004).

\(^9\) Sheng is an abbreviation that stands for Swahili and English, and this is a very dynamic creole language spoken in most urban centres and among most young people in East Africa (see more in the following Chapters).
how a particular Taliban gang controlled certain sites in the former Mungiki stronghold of Bondeni, where illegal alcohol was distilled.

I arrived back in Mathare in July 2010 for a long period of fieldwork (July 2010-June 2011), and expected to continue my research with this Taliban gang. However, this group had been ousted by residents and local gangs in late 2009, because of the level of violence it had deployed to exert control and establish security, which is one of the main income-generating activities undertaken by many of the gangs in Nairobi ghettos. A young woman, whose house had been burned to the ground during the violence that ousted the Taliban gang from Bondeni Village, narrated the following to me in December 2010:

Another boy was beaten, he was a Luo, but from another clan [than the members of this Taliban gang]. It was late last year, December there. They threw him in the river, made him drink that water, so he died. [...] There was tension. They had burned a boy from Shantit [an area in Bondeni Village], in a matrass. [...] The fight that chased Taliban leaders was started because they killed that boy, he was a thief.

In view of the contacts I had established with this Taliban gang over time, I still expected to be able to conduct research with the Taliban leaders who had retreated to their strongholds in Mathare, namely Area 4B and Mradi or 4A (see Map 4). Yet, when I arrived in July 2010, tensions between the groups in Bondeni Village and Area 4B were still high, and my friends and research participants from the two areas advised me against it. I therefore re-focused on the many other gang members in Bondeni with whom I had already established a working relationship prior to this research project. I thus stumbled upon what was, to me, an interesting discovery.

Surprisingly, I encountered many former Taliban members in July 2010 who still worked in Bondeni distilling illegal alcohol near the riverside. It transpired that only the main leaders of this Taliban gang had left the area after its clashes with residents. This new research circumstance guided me towards considering how the Taliban and, before them, Mungiki leaders came and went, whereas many of the members of such ethnic-based groups re-joined local gangs after their demise. I describe these local gangs as 'working gangs' because their members referred to their income-generating activities as work. I thus realised that these local groups formed the basis upon which ethnic-based gangs came and went, and therefore merited analyses of their own.

As a consequence, the focus in this research is on the everyday practices (De Certeau 1988) of working gang members, and in particular on their decision-making in relation to shifting personal, historical, political and social contexts. This is helpful when it comes to both grasping the incessant processes of joining and leaving working gangs in the context of individual social navigation struggles, and exploring how this is tied to positions of manhood and notions of work. Examining the perspectives, feelings and experiences of these men enables the production of in-depth analyses of their strategies, motivations and legitimisations. This book will show that these factors were intimately linked to processes of identification, and directed at immediate needs and future aspirations. Such a local
viewpoint also helps in problematising the seemingly self-evident correlation between gangs as thugs for hire and political violence in Nairobi ghettos that still prevails in the dominant discourse on political violence and ethnicity in Kenya (e.g. HRW 2008). I will thus demonstrate that starting from the point of view of the everyday role of gangs in local settings enables the reader to acquire a different understanding of their roles in relation to wider political and economic developments in Kenya.

The question that is central in this book is: Why did young men in Bondeni and Kosovo, which are two ghetto villages in Mathare, join and leave working gangs? The main period of research started during the 2007/8 post-election violence, right after the demise of the Mungiki gangs in 2007, and ends with the 2013 general elections. In this period, the positions of the working gangs in Mathare were profoundly in flux; for instance, the Taliban groups tried to gain control of the chang’aa industry in 2008-9, but were successfully resisted by local working gangs.

There are three sub-questions that emerge from the central question: How were working gangs tied to processes of becoming men according to local notions of manhood (Willemse 2009: 218) in Mathare? How did young, male working gang members relate to the relatively strong socio-economic positions of women in Mathare? As this book will show, the majority of the gang bosses10 were women, and often relatives of the young, male gang members, with many of these women also being members of community development organisations. I therefore explore why gangs both cooperated with and fought against such groups. The final sub-question is: How should we understand the participation of young, male working gang members in wider junctures of violence at the local and national level, as in the 2007/2008 post-election clashes? I attempt to show that such ambiguous and volatile participation in broader struggles can only be understood in relation to the gang members’ shifting articulations of belonging and entitlement in the local setting.

**Working gangs and volatile links to ‘ethnicity’**

The importance of work in the processes of local gang formation in Mathare emerged as a central theme in my research. In contrast to the dominant view of gangs in Kenya as ethnically and politically motivated (e.g. Wabala 2013) and operating in networks that

---

10 I refer to the women and men who gave the gang members assignments to distil and smuggle illegal alcohol – or sell heroin – as ‘bosses.’ The gang members refer to these people as masonko or wadosi (both of which mean ‘bosses’ in Sheng). These bosses engage in professional relationships with gang members and, by assigning and organising the work, largely determine who becomes a member of a particular gang (see also Chapter 2). The gang itself often had members who took on more informal leadership positions, for instance during conflict with other gangs or when providing security. During the time of my research (2007-2013), a majority of the alcohol and drugs bosses were still women and their dominance emanated from the history of sex work in this ghetto, as explored in Chapter 1. As the numbers of the older generation of women who have controlled the alcohol industry since its onset gradually decline, more and more men (many of whom are descendants or other relatives of these women) are becoming bosses. In both industries (alcohol and heroin), the bulk of the business continues to be controlled by a few families who have both male and female members working as bosses. So, one gang may have a grandmother, a mother and a daughter from the same family as a boss, with sons and uncles starting to join their ranks in more recent times. Previously, male relatives were mostly employed to distil the alcohol, but as some family businesses grew, these men also started to take on positions as bosses.
encompassed different ghettos, most of the gangs in Mathare were in fact highly local and multi-ethnic and based on popular notions of work. These working gangs are primarily organised around income-generating activities such as distilling alcohol and selling stolen goods and drugs, and operated in specific, albeit ever-shifting, turfs within the ghetto. These gangs thus differ from ethnic-based groups like the Mungiki and Taliban gangs in terms of locality and power, as well as with respect to ethnic and political identification (or a lack thereof). Moreover, the working gangs appeared in Mathare years before the Mungiki gangs rose to power, and continue to exist today.

This book takes a close look at two working gangs in Mathare: an alcohol distilling group called the ‘One Touch’ gang in Bondeni Village; and a group of drugs dealers called the ‘Ruff Skwad’ gang in Kosovo, which is another neighbourhood in Mathare. For the young men I worked with, it was crucial to distinguish work from crime, although their distinctions followed unexpected lines; these young gang members all referred to their long-term income-generating activities (in their cases distilling alcohol or dealing heroin) as work, and contrasted these notions of work to crime. Worldwide, gang members tend to refer to illegal income-generating activities as work, and to the fluidity that exists between notions of legality and illegality. This research departs from the perspectives of gang members, and so it is important to follow the subdominant notions of licit and illicit acts that are at play in these ‘border spaces’ (Fagan & Freeman 1999; Hagedorn 2007; Roitman 2006; Nordstrom 2004). Nairobi ghettos can also be regarded as border spaces, as these localities mark the boundaries of the ‘space of the nation’ and can, as such, be taken as ‘othered spaces.’ From such a state perspective, ghettos as border spaces are, to a great extent, invisible (Scott 1998), and thus extremely underserviced (in terms of housing, sanitation, security and so on), yet their borders are highly policed. This is illustrated by the systematic unlawful killings of young ghetto men by the police (Alston 2009; Probert 2014). In this vein, we can even speak of “bordered” spaces (see also Van Houtum & Van Naerssen 2002; Popescu 2012). Alternative notions of respectability often emerge in such bordered spaces. The dominant notions on morality and legality hold little currency in these contexts as a result of the complete failure of the law, especially by local law enforcers. In negotiation of dominant discourses on morality and legality (see also Willemse 2007: 373) people in border spaces often imagine alternatives to such dominant notions to meet their local experiences. In this book, I explore the fluidity between these notions in everyday practices and how these shaped the processes of working gang formation in Mathare.

What I describe as working gangs in Kenya has received very little academic attention, although they are powerful entities in Mathare. The focus on Mungiki gangs in 11 All of the names of people, gangs and hangouts have been anonymised at the request of my research participants for reasons of safety. I included my participants in the phase of analysing the data, and we edited the book and changed all of the names that they deemed could be dangerous to them together. Only the names of the ghetto (Mathare) and the ghetto villages (such as Bondeni and Kosovo) remain the same. All of the other names are fictional, and I therefore cannot analyse why, for instance, gangs use certain names to refer to places, groups and people.
12 As has been stated, the partnership between ethnic-based gangs and working gangs helped the former to gain power, while resistance from working gangs also led to their overthrow in Mathare.
media and academic representations has, at times, fostered the perception that these groups entered seemingly virgin territory inside the Nairobi ghettos during the late 1990s, and were highly unique in their operations and services (e.g. Henningsen & Jones 2013). This is inaccurate. Indeed, long before the Mungiki gangs emerged, local working gangs provided jobs and acted as security agents; they were later popularly dubbed vigilante groups (Anderson 2002). The Mungiki gangs did have unique features in that they had very specific (albeit constantly changing) religious and political ideologies, and their power and scale of organisation were unrivalled (Wamue 2001, 2002). Accordingly, these gangs were able to provide services to a much wider network of people. Yet these groups did not operate in isolation, but always worked in conjunction, and in competition, with local working gangs.

Following the relatively short-lived presence of ethnic-based gangs in Mathare when compared to the longevity of the working gangs, it is remarkable that they, in particular the Mungiki gangs, have attracted all of the media and academic attention thus far. This book will reveal that working gangs are crucial when it comes to developing a better understanding of all of the gangs in Mathare, including their roles in violent events and, perhaps more importantly, with respect to other social, political and economic dynamics of everyday life. This local perspective also enables analyses of why young ghetto men left their working gang from time to time and joined ethnic-based gangs to participate in violence. That many working gang members joined ethnic-based gangs during violence, despite strong local attachments, came as a great surprise to many local residents. This research explores why this took place, and looks at how this relates to volatile confluences of class, locality and ethnicity that have fuelled consecutive junctures of violence in Mathare since 2002.

**Struggles over manhood**

Focusing on work in processes of working gang formation highlighted the dependence of young, male gang members on women to access work. Accordingly, this study explores the struggles of these young men to achieve senior manhood, and asks how this is tied to the incessant processes of joining and leaving working gangs. Especially striking was the tension between their relentless ambition to live up to the standards set by the dominant discourse on masculinities in urban Kenya\(^\text{13}\) and their fear of becoming increasingly redundant. Such anxieties were a direct consequence of the historical, social and economic processes that put the women of Mathare in a relatively strong socio-economic position. Young men conveyed to me, in all sorts of ways, how much this put them on the spot. For them, the gang space became one of the few spaces left in which they could still enact their

---

\(^{13}\) The dominant discourse on masculinities in urban Kenya deviated slightly from dominant notions of manhood that are prevalent in rural Kenya in that the women in rural farming communities are often viewed as the main providers of daily food items such as vegetables (through subsistence farming). Urban variations of this gender division in terms of providing for the household were also practiced in Nairobi ghettos, for instance when women owned food stalls and used their stock and profits to supply food items for the household. In many cases, as in Mathare, the women in practice provided more to local households than men. Strikingly, the men in urban areas continued to be bestowed with the sole responsibility to provide; the women who contributed to these urban households were, in local discourse, generally conceptualised by both men and women as merely ‘helping out’ (see more in Chapter 4).
manhood and claim power in a context that was marked by the growing autonomy of women. Women were the head of most households and owned most shops, and most alcohol and drugs bosses were women and women ran most of the bars. Women have historically taken on powerful positions in Mathare, and the preference of NGOs to focus on and include them (Dogra 2011) has further increased the gap between women and young men in more recent times. Many of the older men in Mathare found ways to enact their manhood through local government structures, for instance by becoming village elders and working with the local administration. Young men, however, were mostly left out. This highlights that women (both young and old) had social and economic positions in Bondeni Village that deviated from the normative gender roles in Kenya, which continue to be marked by patriarchal notions (Spronk: 2012).

Gang members carefully built their reputations (Salo 2006) while “social death” (Patterson 1982; Vigh 2006: 240) was always imminent. Consequently, this study analyses gang membership in relation to young men’s anxieties over being ‘the provider’, and thus over manhood, brotherhood and fatherhood, especially in terms of how this was related to joining and leaving working gangs. In popular and academic discourses, young men in sub-Saharan Africa continue to be predominantly cast as culprits of violence and threats to the social order and the authority of older generations (Bay 2006:10-11; e.g. Were 2008). In contrast, scant attention is paid to the predicaments of young and poor men in Nairobi and elsewhere, such as the perpetual extra-judicial killings that occur in Kenya. This study aims to unpack and contextualise pervasive essentialised notions of ‘African masculinity’, with the goal instead being to highlight its multiplicity, fluidity and context bounded-ness. Recently, ever more research is looking at (young and poor) men in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Shefer et al. 2007; Morrell 2001), and I hope to contribute to this emerging field by exploring how gangs helped structure the processes of becoming men.

Crucial in my research participants’ pursuit of masculinities is the transition of a boy into a mature man, with circumcision playing a key role in this, even for many boys who identified as Luo. This study takes manhood to include localised notions of what it means to be a physically mature man (such as being circumcised). For my research participants, it denoted a desired status that was marked by the transition from 'boy' to 'junior' and, eventually, to 'senior' (see also Morrell 2006:16). Masculinity refers to “a cluster of norms, values, and behavioural patterns expressing explicit and implicit expectations of how men should act and represent themselves to others” (Miescher & Lindsay 2003:5). The “hierarchy of masculinities” (Connell 1995) indicates that not all notions of masculinity have equal power and legitimacy in society (Miescher and Lindsay 2003:6). At the same

---

14 The representation of women and men in development discourse has its own problems, aptly discussed by Dorga (2012).

15 See also: Morrell 2005; Ouzgane & Morell 2005; Richter & Morrell 2006; Lindsay & Miescher 2003; Miescher 2005; Gibson & Hardon 2006; Vigh 2006; Silberschmidt 2001, 2004; Mwangi 2004; Uchendu 2007; and Ako-Nai 2013.

16 This rite of passage was sometimes also practised by men in Mathare who identified with ethnic groups that are not known to circumcise young men, such as the Luo. This was quite remarkable to observe for people with Luo backgrounds generally regard circumcision as the defining difference between them and those with Kikuyu backgrounds. In political discourse, circumcision has even become a key issue in discussing political leadership – see more on this in Chapter 2.
time, shifting dominant masculinities govern different spaces and are often in competition with each other. For instance, within the confines of the ghetto, my research participants often displayed a stoic toughness as part of performing masculine ideals. However, outside the ghetto, such bodily performances were often associated with gangsters and could attract unwelcome police attention. The ability to navigate these different spaces and shift codes in order to 'pass' for 'non-ghetto men' in the cityscape had a major impact on whether an individual would be able to leave the working gang, which was an aim shared by all of the gang members I spoke to. Accordingly, this research analyses the different ways in which my research participants enacted gender identities. How did they (re)present and position themselves in different contexts, e.g. on their own, with fellow gang members, with women, in the city centre, in the ghetto, and so on?

Deteriorating social and economic conditions in Nairobi’s ghettos increasingly had an impact on the ability of young men to live up to masculine ideals, such as being the provider (see also Silberschmidt 1999). This study explores why young ghetto men were so engaged in particular kinds of imaginings against all the odds. Masculinity is not a given, but is acquired and enacted, and the young men in Mathare continually struggled to become men according to local conceptions (see also Willemse 2009; cf. Silberschmidt 2004:51, 2001). My aim is to approach the masculinities experienced in a Nairobi ghetto that were incurred by trying to live up to unrealistic expectations (cf. Spronk 2012). Paramount among the ambitions of these men was a deep desire to become a father; not only to father children, but to also act as a father and the head of their household, thus establishing them as senior men. This urban masculine ideal of the provider stood in stark contrast with the fact that most households in Mathare were actually run by and provided for by women. As a consequence, becoming a man in the ghetto thus involved the relentless pursuit of virtually unattainable ideals. Their relationships with women were fraught with contradictions, confusion, diminishing control and concomitant anxieties. Accordingly, this research looks at the tenacity with which these young men tried to live up to this ideal, and how this influenced decision-making, especially with regard to joining and leaving working gangs.

Dominant representations of gangs in Kenya

As stated above, broader political frameworks have dominated studies of gangs in Kenya up to now. Sensational media representations have often explained the alleged susceptibility of young ghetto men to political manipulation by using the term 'idle.' Qualifying young and poor men in this way, and therefore as dangerous, is an often-heard repertoire in Kenya when it comes to explaining political violence and other social ills that are ostensibly perpetrated by young and poor men (cf. Wamucii & Idwasi 2011; Were 2008). Nevertheless, most of the young men I worked with can hardly be described as idle; they woke up early to look for work or hustling opportunities, and would often not return home before nine in the evening, thus spending a total of 18 hours out on the street to make themselves available whenever opportunities arose. Such pervasive stereotypes, however, continue because of a lack of knowledge of the multiple meanings of gangs in the
daily lives of both young ghetto men and community residents at large, and especially the central role of gangs as associations of work.

Ethnographic studies on, and the corresponding theoretical interpretations of, gangs in sub-Saharan African countries, other than South Africa and Nigeria (e.g. Kynoch 2005; Harnischfeger 2003), are still rather rare. Gangs in most African cities are, more often than not, excluded from the considerations of such groups within a global framework (e.g. Hagedorn 2007, 2008), which is a body of work that is still dominated by studies on gangs in the Americas (Covey 2010). This book aims to contribute to a better conceptual knowledge of gangs in sub-Saharan African ghettos. The term gang does feature in academic texts on Kenya (and other sub-Saharan African countries), but is often mentioned in the same breath, or used intermittently with terms such as resistance movements, militias, rebels, political groups, religious groups and vigilante groups, whereas the significant differences between such groups are not specified (e.g. Branch & Cheeseman 2009). The analyses of working gangs in this book aim to improve the understanding of different types of gang in urban Kenya, as well as their roles within the context of larger social, political and economic developments. I hope to demonstrate that this also has implications for conceptions of gangs and violence elsewhere.

However, using the term gang to describe such groups in Mathare is highly problematic. Firstly, the emic use of the term in Mathare poses problems, as the Sheng word for gang, *geri*, mostly denotes groups of men who are engaged in robbery, both in and outside the ghetto. To some extent, this is reflected in the popular binary in Mathare between local notions of work and crime, as mentioned above. The groups of young ghetto men I worked with mostly described themselves as ‘companies’ and ‘bazes’ (‘networks of friends and the locality of their hangout’ in Sheng – Githinji 2006; Thieme 2013). Like their American counterparts (Hagedorn 2007: 301), they often shunned the term gang in their self-definition given its negative overtones in dominant discourses (e.g. Mwakio & Mwahanga 2013; Ombati 2013; Kamau 2013). I recognise these self-definitions. Nevertheless, I also deliberately continue to use the term gang in my analyses to place this research within the popular and academic debates on gangs, not only in Kenya, but also in sub-Saharan Africa and even worldwide. These are debates that still often cast the young men I worked with as ‘dangerous gangsters.’ I therefore hope to contribute to these debates by providing alternative connotations of what these groups (referred to as gangs in the dominant discourses) signified to ghetto residents – both gang and non-gang members – in the context of their everyday lives.

This leads on to the second problem with the term gang, namely its tendency to invoke the image of a fixed group, whereas central to this research is its variable and

17 For more examples of interesting literature on gangs in different African countries, see: Jensen 2008; Salo 2006; Matuzits 2009; Kinnes 2000; Glaser 2000.
18 With the exception of gangs studies such as the recent book on ‘Global Gangs’ edited by Hazen and Rodgers (2014).
19 For more examples of the use of the term gang in academic work on Kenya, see: Anderson 2002a; Mueller 2008; Frederiksen 2010; and Gecaga, 2007.
20 For an analysis of the urban gang *anake a fortii* and Mau Mau, see Berman & Lonsdale 1992, and, for an impression on gangs and gang activities in Eastlands, Nairobi during the 1970s, see: Kiriamiti 1990.
contingent 'groupness' (Brubaker 2004). I thus explicitly hope to circumvent the essentialising tendencies of the term, and instead study gangs in Mathare not as bounded wholes, but as fluid and temporary networks of, mainly, young men whose aim is to improve their access to social and economic opportunities (work) in and outside the ghetto. As a consequence, this book aims to show that becoming a gang member is a continuous process, as is the process of leaving. Furthermore, gangs have proliferated in Mathare, and indeed worldwide (cf. Hagedorn 2001, 2008), since the early 1990s; the spatial, economic and social changes since then, which were wrought by the intensification of flows of money, goods, people and ideas (often referred to as globalisation – Stiglitz 2003), and the ensuing concomitant wealth disparities (Piketty 2014), have added to feelings of marginalisation and growing insecurity across the globe (Appadurai 1996:46; 1999, 2006; Harvey 1990: 296).21 The rise of gangs in Kenya and elsewhere can, to some extent, be explained by a growing need for alternative positions, identifications and economic activities in the face of mounting uncertainty. Accordingly, gangs are generally analysed as resistance-based, which is a shared position (be it ethnic, religious, class, etc.) from which social and economic marginalisation within society is experienced (Castells 2011; Hagedorn 2008). Gangs in Kenya are no exception. However, these groups are more than just geared towards alternative political and economic survival strategies (e.g. Glaser 2000); they are also an “expression of social cohesion in peripheral communities” (Salo 2006:148-149). This study therefore analyses working gangs in Mathare not only from the perspective of their members, but also from the viewpoints of their families, neighbours, bosses and friends, and within the wider context of socio-economic and political relations and group-making projects both in and outside the ghetto.

Sensational media representations of gangs and their involvement in violence are to some extent informed by actualities, because these groups do participate in violence. The problem is that these portrayals predominantly feature groups of angry young men shouting in the street, destroying property and physically harming people (e.g. Ombati 2013). Yet, they almost never show the women (see also Kihato Forthcoming) and elders who cheer these men on and provide food and weapons, as happened during the 2007/8 post-election violence in Mathare. This book explores a different view of the participation of gangs in violence in this area. Contrary to the “continued existence of folk constructions of Africa” (Bay 2006:3) and African men, violence is not a typically 'African' or 'male' trait, but a universal phenomenon. In the ghetto, acts of violence (such as looting, raping and killing) are remarkably commonplace, and not only involve young men. During my

---

21 Globalisation is identified by the hybridisation of cultures, but has a flip side that is characterised by a search for authenticity (Geschiere 2009:1; Turner & Brownhill 2004) and closure (Willemsen 2007: 45). Neo-liberal capitalism on the one hand intensified global flows of money and people, and on the other increased the sense of insecurity among groups who had less or no access to these global flows. Globalisation thus appears to also lead to a stronger articulation of cultural contrasts, brought forth by the desire to belong to a clear cultural whole (Willemsen 2007:45) among groups that perceive themselves as economically and culturally marginalised by neo-liberal globalisation forces. The policies forced upon sub-Saharan African countries, including Kenya, in the form of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) were based on the “bypassing the state” and “good governance” paradigms (Santiso 2001; 2002) shaped by the neo-liberal agenda, and were aimed at promoting access to the global market. These policies and conditions have, however, had devastating consequences for vulnerable groups and markedly increased their sense of marginalisation.
fieldwork, I frequently encountered mob justice, i.e. a spontaneous group of men and women killing an alleged thief with stones and fire (so called ‘necklaceing’ using a car tyre and gasoline). What is more, looting and stealing (often with the use of force) happened on a daily basis at the hands of both men and women. I also heard about several incidents of the rape of women by other women (using a broken soda bottle), and have observed several episodes of domestic violence between husbands and wives that saw the husband hospitalised. These latter incidents were more exceptions than the rule, but they do show that young men did not have a monopoly on violence in this ghetto. This especially comes to the fore when one takes into account the fact that it is young men who were mainly targeted by the shoot-to-kill policy issued by the police (see also Star Editor 2013; McGregor 2014). Violence never stands on its own (Schep-Hughes & Bourgois 2004:1; Bourgois 2010), and the skewed representation of moments of violence obscures ‘everyday violence’, by which I mean the experience of poverty, exclusion and humiliation from which such moments emerge (see also Schep-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 1, Chapter 20).

This research looks at underlying social forces, predicaments and possibilities in relation to participation in violent conflict, and not so much at the physical acts of violence themselves (Vigh 2006:11). Violence is not an anomaly, but part and parcel of social processes. Direct acts of violence (see also Galtung 1996) that threaten "bodies and the bare life of bodies" (Bay 2006: 3) arise from “routine violence” (Pandey 2006), such as exclusion mechanisms in society. For instance, in and exclusionary aspects of notions of citizenship and belonging in Kenya are based on specific ethnic, age and gender configurations. These shape legitimating discourses of escalating and excessive direct acts of violence. The concept of routine violence allows a focus on the violence of routine political practices – the drawing up of political categories and the writing of national histories – and on the discursive, socio-economic and political conditions that allow and legitimise the ‘undisguised’ political violence and its ‘routinisation’ in everyday life (Pandey 2006). Routine violence, as it is described by Pandey, describes the violence “written into the making and continuation of contemporary political arrangements, and into the production of majorities and minorities” (Pandey 2006:1). The conditions that make direct acts of violence possible, and the way that they are shaped by shifting power relations and concomitant exclusion mechanisms, must be part and parcel of any analysis of violence. It is therefore crucial to go beyond direct acts of violence (Pandey 2006:14) as an extraordinary event (Ries 2002). For the situations studied in this book, it is even a moot point as to whether we can actually distinguish everyday violence (Schep-H Hughes 1992) from the periodic outbursts of political violence and gang participation therein in Kenya.

More than any other category, routine political practices in the Kenyan context are based on ethnicity. Following Erikson, I take ethnicity to be an aspect of social relationships between agents who regard themselves as culturally distinct from members of other groups (Erikson 2002:11). Ethnic identification is a highly ambiguous construct that is fluid, intersecting and context bound. In this book, I set out to contextualise essentialised notions of ethnicity that still prevail in the popular discourse on citizenship and belonging (see also Lonsdale 2008a and 2008b) by showing if, why – and if not, why not – when and how ethnicity moves to the foreground of social and political relationships during periods of
violence in Mathare. Ethnic identification is performative (Butler 1999) and thus imagined by individuals in relation to ever-changing contexts in order to articulate belonging and claim entitlement. The contingencies (see also Bhabha 1994) and inconsistencies that hide beneath the apparent self-evidence of ensuing notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ bring forth great uncertainty (Appadurai 1999) and can lead to direct acts of violence. I have adopted from De Vries and Weber the insight that such violence is often practised in the name of self-determination. When notions of belonging define an ‘other’, it is actually the ‘self’ that is determined; direct acts of violence legitimised by processes of ‘othering’ (Said 1978; see also Spivak 1988; Morris 2010) are therefore attempts to demarcate the boundaries that separate the self from the other (De Vries & Weber 1997:1-2; Willemse 2007:145). Such moments of violence thus arise from profound uncertainty about entitlement and the belonging of ‘selves.’ The threat posed by the others is quelled by attacking them in an attempt to chase them away and, in extreme situations, kill them, thus establishing “death certainty” (Appadurai 1999). In the following chapters, my goal is to explore and contextualise the performative power (Marshall-Fratani 2006) of shifting dominant and subdominant discourses on ethnic and local belonging and othering at play during different periods of violence in Mathare from the perspective of the young working gang members involved.

Social navigation: making choices while facing constant uncertainties

At the core of this research project is the issue of why young men in Mathare join and leave working gangs. This requires further reflection on how to analyse the decision-making processes of these young men in terms of their everyday lives. How, for instance, was decision-making among young ghetto men determined by, and potentially resistant to, the multiple and contradictory power configurations in which these men were positioned? The study looks at how processes of choice-making are shaped by these young men’s own logics, identifications and individual circumstances within the context of being positioned within discursive frameworks and social relationships. The concept of ‘social navigation’, which was further developed by Henrik Vigh (e.g. 2006; 2009), helps us to study decision-making among these men and analyse their movements (including making decisions and acting on them) within temporal and spatial contexts. This highlights the social and bodily praxis aimed at improving social possibilities by evaluating “the immediate and the imagined” (Vigh 2006:13/136) and taking action (including ‘inaction’) accordingly. It is particularly appropriate to study the experiential level of social processes within highly unstable contexts, and grasp the reasons why young men join and leave gangs from the vantage point of acquiring and maintaining a higher social status as men.

These men were embedded in multiple social relationships and power configurations (Ortner 2006; Mills 2006). This concept allows explorations of the impact of shifting discourses, social relations and material effects, which in Mathare are marked by certain uncertainty (Vigh 2009; see also Whyte 1997), on young men’s movements:

The concept, in other words, highlights motion within motion; it is the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled, and when used to
illuminate social life it directs our attention to the fact that we move in social environments of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along. As such, the concept adds a third dimension to our understanding of movement and mobility. Where we normally look either at the way social formations move and change over time, or the way agents move within social formations, navigation allows us to see the intersection – or rather interactivity (cf. Jensen, 1998) – between the two. [Vigh 2009: 420]

Accordingly, social navigation entails constant reorientation in response to evolving contexts and events and shifting power relations, but always within the framework of discursively available pathways. The young men in this study constantly redrew trajectories into the future in relation to current change. These were not intentional, single or linear routes that were obvious in direction and had clearly defined destinations, but unfolding, multiple, ambiguous and diverging imaginings without fixed outcomes. Their movements in, and evaluations of, the immediate were largely informed by their anxieties, anticipations and aspirations with regard to their social status as men. These affects and desires were constantly contemplated, adapted and reconstructed, as were the pathways to realising them. The concomitant concept of 'social horizon' denotes the interface between vistas of future opportunities and constraints and shifting discourses and social circumstances that constitute social environments in the moment (Vigh 2006: 30; 2009). In this book, this notion is seen through the lens of young ghetto men, and is therefore helpful in terms of analysing how these men evaluated the present and anticipated the future in a specific space and at a particular moment of time, which is their temporally and spatially constructed social horizon.

However, the twin concepts of social navigation and social horizon also raise questions. Most young men in Mathare shared dominant subject positions (see also Foucault 1978), such as the label 'ghetto boy', but their choices differed immensely. How can this framework help when it comes to grasping differences in choice-making among similarly positioned men and thus improving a view on their agency within the context of highly oppressive structures? The social navigation framework brings into view the intersections between social formations in motion and moving agents, but does not provide specific tools to analyse this in individual life-trajectories. I want to analyse how, as part of their social navigation trajectories, young ghetto men negotiated pertinent dominant discourses and positioned themselves, and how they concomitantly imagined others. I thus set out to explore how looking at time- and space-bound processes of negotiation may add to the social navigation framework and highlight differences in decision-making among these men. By negotiation I mean how people who, in particular contexts are not part of powerful institutions, relate to, respond to, comply with and contest widely accepted and highly authoritative ‘truths’ and subject positions. Through the process of negotiation, agents position themselves and imagine others in the context of being discursively positioned, thereby enabling excluded discursive positions to be imagined. These alternative positions may sometimes take the form of open resistance and contestation,
although they may also, more often and less obviously, develop as part of the processes of imagining the self as an individual and part of a group (Willemse 2007: 373).

My aim is to grasp the agency of the young men in Mathare by closely analysing their narrations of the self, for it is the act of narration (see also Butler 1997 cited in Davids & Willemse 2014: 3) in its broadest sense that constitutes, and is constituted by, the process of negotiation. Discourse (Mills 2006: 77-102, 2003) offers possible positions for subjects to adopt or not (Willemse 2007:128). As already stated, people are agents of their own positioning, but do not have the same space within discourse to negotiate dominant subject positions, imagine alternative subject positions and enact agency (Willemse 2007: 45/132; Skeggs 2004). I aim to explore how the concepts of social navigation and social horizon can work together with the notion of ‘negotiation’ to achieve a more nuanced analysis of young men's movements that is based on their perspectives and experiences. This calls for a research method that enables me to analyse the way young ghetto men negotiate dominant discourses, position themselves and imagine notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in varying contexts as part of their social navigation trajectories.

**Analysing my data: biographic narratives ‘against the grain’**

In this book, I use the method of analysing biographical narratives 'against the grain', as developed by Karin Willemse (2007), because it enables me to explore the individual processes of negotiation of the young male participants, i.e. the way these men positioned themselves in the context of being positioned within pertinent discursive frameworks. This will allow me to analyse their multiple, fluid, context-bound and often ambiguous constructions of the self and, concomitantly, the other, thus enabling me to bring more nuances to my analyses of their individual social navigation struggles.

The use of biographical narratives as a method of research is not uncontested (Bourdieu 2004). In particular, their use in a non-Western research context has been the subject of rigorous scholarly debate (Tonkin 1995; Sommer 1988; Salazar 1991) because of the potentially euro- centric ideas on selfhood and society implied in the term biography. Yet, this method does not have to imply preconceived notions about the self or the structures of the text when the process of narration is largely directed by the narrator. This means, for instance, giving the narrator space to represent him/herself as an individual and/or as belonging to a collectivity. Moreover, many of those who experience themselves as belonging to a collectivity would nonetheless often represent themselves as individuals (Willemse 2007: 27; 2012).

---

22 Agency is enacted through constructions of the self, i.e. the way subjects act, think and speak (narration in its broadest sense) within the dynamics of discursively demarcated spaces and times and allotted subject positions (Van Stapele 2014). Accordingly, this book analyses how the young ghetto men as positioned subjects negotiated restrictive subject positions such as that of the ghetto boy by assuming, appropriating, affirming, tweaking and resisting them, and how this shaped their decisions to join and leave working gangs. As already stated, this research aims to go beyond ostensibly self-evident ‘truths’, and sets out to look for polyvocality and make room for alternative meanings, positions and experiences. This critical research approach allows me to bring out and explore how certain social processes become visible in the individual lives and experiences of these young men (cf. Willemse 2007: 44-46; Mossink 1988: 10).

23 With additional references to other scholars such as Norman Fairclough (2001), Sara Mills (2006), Julie Kristeva (1986) and Maaike Meijer (1996).
When using biographies in research, one has to take into account the problem of power; the researcher has a project with the research participant and exercises interpretive power (Hernández 1995:160). The current study is based on a concept of epistemology that defines knowledge as embodied, partial and situated. As such, knowledge is a temporal construct that is determined historically, locally and personally (Schrijvers 1993: 156; Haraway 2008; Braidotti 2011). In this vein, knowledge is taken as the result of social relations and interactions. As a consequence, narrated texts can never be taken at face value. The on-going interaction between researcher and research participant sets the stage for the process of intersubjective knowledge production (Willemse 2007).24 Intersubjectivity between researcher and research participant is, however, often infused with asymmetrical power relations that researchers can attempt to, but never fully abrogate. Researchers can question such power hierarchies, but they cannot discard their role as a researcher and the fact that they listen to and read the narrative as meaningful with respect to the construction of alternative modes of academic narratives (Willemse 2007: 141; Davids & Willemse 2014; Behar 199325).

In an interview I conducted with Kingi’s grandmother in 2005, I certainly became acutely aware of the way different power dynamics had an impact on my research relationships and, as a consequence, the knowledge produced. I first met Shosho (‘grandmother’ in Sheng) Kingi in August 1991 when I was 16 years old, and so wanted to interview her in 2005 about the local Mungiki gang. Kingi and I had visited Shosho’s bar on a number of different occasions previously, and I naively expected our interview to naturally flow from the normal chitchat we shared. There we sat, in the bar, with a look of anticipation and determination in our eyes. Both Kingi and I were excited to learn more about Shosho’s life story and how she viewed the history of Mathare. However, the first day of our interview dragged on, and we all sat in awkward silence, relieved when a customer walked in to break the tension. Every question I did try to ask was met with a confused expression on Shosho’s face, and her answers were generic and brusque, leaving hardly any room for further discussion. She seemed shy, and pampered me as if I were a ‘guest of honour’ instead of a family friend. As the day progressed, more men came in to drink, and my continuous efforts to ask questions were increasingly overshadowed by both their loud murmurs and by Shosho Kingi herself, who got on with the job of serving them. At the end of the day, I left her bar frustrated. I felt I had bothered Shosho Kingi, but I could not quite grasp what exactly had gone wrong.

After a restless night, I returned the following morning as we had agreed, but I had now decided to approach our interview differently. Kingi and I chatted over a hot cup of tea and Shosho interjected with her usual wit. I began to ask Kingi questions about his childhood and, more generally, Mathare, and Shosho often answered for and made jokes about him. I then realised what had happened the day before. Speaking about herself and opening up about personal aspects of her life history to her grandson and a younger white woman had probably felt very unfamiliar and awkward. Her response to me had thus been


formal and further shaped by what she thought I expected as a researcher and her views of how her story should be told. I discussed this with Kingi, and he confirmed that Shosho Kingi perhaps thought it was strange that I wanted to learn more about her personal story and views when she did not consider that to be 'history.' Moreover, the presence of male customers in her bar during our interviews undoubtedly influenced her narration, as this prevented her from delving into more personal matters with regard to her own life path.

My approach during our first interview thus encouraged Shosho Kingi to foreground both my white skin and my profession. Power differences and how these influence the intentions of the narrator are an important part of the process of intersubjective knowledge production. Taking into account that power is shifting, relational and productive, the research participant also has power (Ong 1995: 353; Mills 2006: 20) in the production of knowledge, as he/she has his/her own agenda with the researcher and decides what to share, and how to share it, through the use of words, silence and body language (Nencel 2005: 354, 2014; Ghorashi 2008; Ong 1995). I too am positioned within pertinent dominant discourses and thus inscribed with subjectivities, including by my research participants (Willemse 2007: 24). The research setting I had initiated with my notebook in front of me had, in Shosho Kingi’s eyes, prioritised my ‘overseas’ origin, white skin and profession over my long-term relationship with her and her family. She thus awarded me an authority that she associated with white skin, and so responded in a suspicious, formal and distant manner. Additionally, her unfamiliarity and discomfort when it came to talking about her personal history, and my inability to navigate these challenges, contributed to an awkward first research encounter. However, as soon as I again positioned myself as her grandson’s (white) friend, and approached her as his grandmother, she left her formal attitude behind and responded playfully and animatedly, as I had grown accustomed to. The rest of our first series of interviews were conducted in a non-formal atmosphere, and resembled our normal day-to-day chitchat that we usually shared. This nurtured a sense of trust and intimacy, tangibly lessened our distance and increased Shosho’s power to narrate her story as she saw fit. This was how I conducted all of my interviews from that point on. In particular, I constantly tried to strike a balance between the way my research participants preferred to narrate their stories and the information I was looking for. This did not, however, ever become easy.

The goal of this study is to empower my research participants by revaluing their perspectives, which are not dominant in the academic world and in the world of politics, by taking intersubjectivity as a starting point not only of narrative production, but also of narrative analyses (Van Stapele 2014). Accordingly, I discussed the entire book with my research participants during the different stages of analysis and writing, which has brought great depth to the analyses presented in the following chapters. However, this too was a difficult process. Firstly, some of my research participants expressed great interest, but also great pain, while reading the chapters about their lives. Indeed, it was not uncommon for them to shed tears while considering and commenting on my analyses. Kingi shared with me: "I keep the doors closed, but reading opens these doors, makes me remember the hard times." Secondly, some feared repercussions from the predominantly female gang bosses, and we therefore together deleted any information that could endanger them.
Thirdly, a few were afraid that other people in Mathare might find out their true identity, even after we anonymised people, groups and places. We thus altered some texts to avoid this as far as possible. In the main, the feedback concerned the analyses presented in this book, and one participant remarked: "This book, it tells the way things are. This book is important to us, because it tells our story to the world. You really know ghetto life, you have told our story." This was the biggest compliment they could have paid me.

This all leads to an important question: How valid are conclusions based on the analyses of biographical narratives? The main bone of contention here concerns the validity of my conclusions, because of their subjective quality. I maintain that conclusions drawn from narratives give insight into shared subject positions and the diverse ways agents negotiate the discursive frameworks in which they are positioned. Their validity is, in my view, proven by the in-depth understanding that narratives provide of an embodied and situated self. Exceptional examples, when studied in great detail, allow probes into the limits of what is possible and imaginable in any given social context. For instance, every gang member wanted to leave the gang, but only a few like Kingi succeeded. Looking closely at and comparing successful and less successful pathways out of the gang through the life stories of individual men teases out what may have contributed to success and failure. The interplay between structural and individual dynamics described in this book also has an impact on similar trajectories of other young gang members living in Mathare. Accordingly, this type of narrative analysis will provide more general insights into processes of subjectivation (see also Foucault 1982: 212) and the availability of alternative subject positions for the people living in this ghetto.

**Building trust**

As stated above, some of my research participants, such as Kingi, have been friends of mine for more than 20 years. I arrived in Kenya for the first time in 1990 at the age of 15 to volunteer for a youth program in Mathare. Between 1990 and 1998, my volunteer work was mostly aimed at helping local youth programs to raise funds and organise educational youth camps. I have always combined academic research with volunteer work, and started the Duara Foundation in 2003. This is a pro bono organisation that assists local stakeholders in Mathare (NGOs, CSOs, CBOs and ‘informal’ groups such as gangs) to achieve a more gender sensitive, inclusive and effective approach to peace-building, community-led development and educational projects. Between 1998 and now, I have lived and worked in Kenya for more than three months annually on average, although the periods varied from a month to a year. Through these perennial visits, I have slowly been able to build relationships of trust with people such as Kingi. These friends in turn introduced me to a wide network of gangs, youth groups and women’s groups that I still work with today.

Although the number of people I know and have worked with in Mathare is vast, there are still only a few Mathare residents who really trust me. As will become clear in this book, many of those in Mathare feel exploited by people from outside the ghetto (be they politicians, the police and government officials, the clergy or – white – NGO workers). As a consequence, I was always extremely mindful of the fact that every step I took, and every word I uttered, could have unforeseen consequences for the people involved in my
research, and I soon learned to regularly reflect on my every move with Kingi and his wife. They trusted me enough to criticise, and this feedback proved to be crucial when it came to further establishing trusting relationships with gang members and their families. It also helped me, at least to the best of my abilities, to not disappoint or offend them, or put them in any danger.

Many family members, friends and colleagues in the Netherlands frequently asked me whether my fieldwork was dangerous, and the simple answer to this question is 'yes.' However, this is not because my work is on gangs and with gang members. On the contrary even, my research participants went to great lengths to keep me (and them) safe. No, the reason my fieldwork was, to some extent, dangerous, is tied to the research context that is marked by extreme everyday violence. As an illustration, I have witnessed several shoot-outs involving the police who were chasing suspects while spraying bullets into crowds where children were playing and where I was hanging-out with friends. People are so used to this that they immediately fell to the ground in a single motion, whereas I continued to stand, too shocked to move. Witnessing and hearing about all kinds of violence on a daily basis affected me badly. Indeed, in the course of this research project (2007-2014), I have lost several very close friends and their children to police and gang killings, mob justice and the lack of proper health care services. Sometimes, my feelings of powerlessness in the face of all of this violence paralysed me. I did, nevertheless, learn from my research participants how to deal with all of this by taking action, even if only on a small scale, which led us to developing a project together that was based on my research findings and geared towards helping gang members to help themselves (see Chapter 3). I also did not sleep in Mathare, because Kingi warned me that my white presence could attract thieves at night and, as such, endanger both the people I was staying with and myself. Accordingly, I slept at the head office of an NGO working in Mathare called Safi. Nevertheless, I arrived early enough in the area every morning to wake up with a research participant and his family, then staying long enough to end the day with another participant and his family. Overall, Mathare is a volatile context for everyone, most of all for the people who live here. Having said this, I never really felt 'in danger', apart from one incident that opened my eyes to the unforeseen consequences of my presence and my research, not only for the people I worked with, but also for me.

During a night at a club near Mathare in May 2012, a female boss warned me indirectly to stop hanging out with one of her employees (I cannot disclose any details other than these for safety reasons). I had only started doing research with this particular gang in 2008, and I did not have the same rapport with the members and bosses that I had with the other working gangs I had been conducting research with since 1998. The gravity of her threat reached me in dribs and drabs via a number of different people in the days that followed this incident. In particular, I learned that this boss thought I was working with the Kenyan government as an intelligence officer, and friends told me to avoid at all costs areas where I might encounter her or her employees. By now, I was really quite scared. Some days later, Kingi called a youth member I had worked with a few years ago to help me out. In recent years, he had become a renowned and widely-trusted middleman between the bosses of this gang and their employees. He handled their money and,
according to Kingi, they trusted his word. Nevertheless, it still took this young man another few days to convince his boss that I was a social scientist and did not work for the Kenyan government. This highlights the reality that I could not have conducted this research without years and years of building relationships of trust with current and ex-gang members, and without having a wide network of people who knew me and who could help me out when I was at risk.

These relationships also enabled me to walk in Mathare on my own, because I knew people in almost all of the 13 villages that comprise this ghetto. Indeed, many people regarded me as a mwenyepi ('a local person' in Kiswahili), albeit a white one, because they had seen me walking around on my own for more than two decades. This allowed me to be intensively involved in the daily lives of current and ex-gang members and their wives, without them feeling like I was a guest. Accordingly, I went with them to work, the market, school, church, funerals, hospitals, the rural area, meetings and gatherings with family members and bosses, clubs, football matches, and community and festive get-togethers. Most of all, I hung out with them at the distilling spot or other gang spaces. Although I was very familiar with Mathare, it still took me a while to get used to spending a lot of time at the distilling spots near the river; besides the heat and smoke that came from the drums, these places were incredibly filthy, as the contents of the sewers ended up in the river near to where these young men worked and hung out. At the One Touch site where I spent most of my days, the sewer was broken and, instead of ending up in the river, most of its effluent spilled out onto the ground next to where these men played cards and gambled. Moreover, because it was cheaper, the distillers sometimes used old shoes instead of firewood to boost the fires underneath the drums, thus filling the air with black and highly toxic smoke. One gang member told me: "If we don't get killed by the police, we get lung cancer." Furthermore, the young men who did not work often drank the liquor produced at the site, and many were in a permanent state of rowdy drunkenness. They also had to get used to me. Indeed, at the start of my fieldwork, they focused all of their attention on me when I was down at the site. However, after a while, they continued with their daily activities, although they were still mindful of my presence in ways that I only discovered much later. One of them told me: "When you are down, they don't fight, ha ha ha. It is respect, it is good, now we have less fights." Another gang member from Kosovo told me: "It is good you are old. You are like our big siz, ha ha ha, we don't have to seduce you!" On average, I was 10 years older than most of the gang members, apart from Kingi and a few others. This led me

---

26 I have conducted 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kenya for this research, spread out over five years and covering two election cycles (2007-2013 general elections). I combined historical and anthropological (ethnographic) methods, scholarly literature reviews, and newspaper and other written-source analyses with up-close participant observation, focus group discussions and interviews. I held contextual interviews with government officials, aid workers, church officials, NGO workers, teachers and local residents. However, I mostly worked with two gangs (an illegal alcohol-brewing gang and a gang of drug dealers) in two separate parts of Mathare, and conducted multiple interviews with over 40 members. I also organised 19 focus group discussions with around 20 participants (their attendance varied somewhat), and 12 focus group discussions with women who worked as sex workers at the bars frequented by the men I worked with, some of whom were their girlfriends or family members. I have also interviewed the wives, mothers, grandmothers, other relatives, former gang members and current friends of my main research participants.
to realise that I probably would not have been able to conduct this research if I had been younger.

I am still amazed by the extent to which all of the men that feature in this book, and their wives and other family members and friends, not only allowed me to be part of their everyday lives, but also gave me insight into their daily joys and struggles. Having long-term friendships and working relationships with my research participants contributed to my unprecedented access, yet this also posed some dilemmas. Working and living in Kenya, on and off, for the past 24 years had made me something akin to a family member to several families in Mathare. I was also widely considered to be a wealthy white woman with connections to NGOs. As a 'big sister', I thus had certain responsibilities and was expected to, for instance, take part in the funeral arrangements of 'family members', take care of sick family members who were in hospital, or help to pay school fees for 'nephews' and 'nieces', which were duties I performed to the best of my abilities and with a deep love for my 'families.' Yet these responsibilities also wore me down at times, because expectations ran extra high due to my white skin and oversees origins, and the fact that I am not very good at saying 'no'. Furthermore, besides my Mathare families, many other people in the area also had great expectations of me, and thought I could get them aid from, and positions at, different projects and NGOs, despite my limited influence. This made conducting research with them more complicated. Moreover, the expectations people had of me, as well as their disappointment if I could not deliver, had an impact on both the ways they related to me as a researcher and, as a consequence, the narrated text.

I tried to develop a mode of representation in this book that is based on self-reflexivity and represents my multiple and layered relationships with my research participants (see also Nencel 2014). I follow Willemse & Davids and understand self-reflexivity as "taking a critical stance that includes ourselves in the analytical plane by which we may be able to take a step towards fulfilling the feminist desire to create more egalitarian research relationships" (2014). I have therefore tried to 'peel off' the way my own positioning impinged on my reading and selection of narrative texts. I have addressed this throughout the process of analysis by using self-reflexivity and self-doubt as analytical tools (Van Stapele 2014) within my discussions with my research participants about my analyses. Discussing my findings with them in this way helped me to avoid reading too much into texts and, as such, achieve a more textured understanding of their meanings and intentions, without abandoning my responsibility to provide my own interpretation of their experiences (see also Borland 1991). Accordingly, I was able to both better understand the role of working gangs in terms of processes of becoming senior men, and explore the shifts, contradictions and contingencies involved in their articulations of local and ethnic belonging.

In contrast to much of the academic writing based on methodologies that include self-reflexivity and notions of responsible epistemology and representation (cf. Braidotti 2006), I do not analyse these processes at length in this book. I am very present in this work because I describe how people speak to me or what I observe, and I am very much part of the cases analysed. Occasionally, I do elaborate on my relationships with my research participants, my own positioning and the subjectivities that I was inscribed with.
Sticking to the tool of writing against the grain, I also alternate between representing narrative texts, describing contexts and analysing the ways my research participants negotiated dominant discourses. Through the careful wording of the analyses and conclusions offered, I aim to accentuate the possibility of multiple readings of a narrative text. However, presenting the deeper reflective analyses of my own subjectivities and the processes of intersubjective knowledge production that brought forth this book was not possible due to the risks involved for my research participants and myself.

Structure of the book
Chapter 1 starts by describing a walk through Bondeni in Mathare, which is the area that is the main focus of the research. I walked this route almost every day, whether alone, or with young male gang members, their friends, their wives and sometimes their older relatives. This walk introduces key research participants and key localities. These places have been the sites of consecutive violence between gangs, and between gangs and community development organisations, over the past 10 years, which are conflicts that I analyse in the following chapters. Accordingly, this walk sets the stage for delving deeper into the history of Bondeni and provides some background to the gangs in Mathare. It also helps in mapping current power relations and class differences, and thereby provides an important contextualisation of the research questions.

Chapter 2 focuses on the working gang that came to be central in my research, namely the One Touch gang of alcohol distillers. The chapter looks into: why mostly young men chose to join this and other alcohol gangs; who could become members; and at which point in their life trajectories these young men often chose to join a gang. Accordingly, it explores the role of working gangs in structuring the processes of becoming men. This helps the reader to develop an understanding of why young ghetto men considered becoming a working gang member to be a crucial step in pursuing respectable manhood and thus a key phase in their social navigation trajectories.

Chapter 3 looks at why and how most working gang members wanted to leave the gang. In order to become fully recognised and respected as 'senior' men according to popular notions of manhood, they needed to leave the gang and become independent before reaching the age of 30. What kind of strategies and pathways did these young, male gang members construct and navigate to leave the working gang? And why did the majority of these gang members fail to leave, despite their great efforts? This chapter teases out how young men reflected upon changes in their social environments; how this had an impact on their imagined future opportunities and constraints; and how they redrew trajectories, both individually and collectively, to continue pursuing their dream of becoming senior men. This also helps to explore how and why men who were positioned similarly within power configurations negotiated dominant discourses differently and how this had a bearing on different decision-making processes among them.

Chapter 4 offers a comparative analysis of another type of working gang: the Ruff Skwad gang that specialised in drug dealing in Kosovo, Mathare. These gang members made more money than alcohol distillers. However, a striking similarity with their alcohol counterparts was that it was equally hard for them to leave the gang. This chapter explains
that part of the reason for this pertains to the modes in which the Ruff Skwad members negotiated the dominant discourse on masculinities and positioned themselves in relation to women, other gangs in Mathare, wealthy counterparts and, ultimately, each other. The way many enacted the alternative subject position of 'ghetto pride', for instance, denoted the investment of vast resources in performing swag. This greatly influenced their decision-making and brought forth great dilemmas with regard to increasingly conflicting social navigation trajectories.

The final two chapters deal with the implications of my focus on working gangs, outlined above, the struggle over masculinity and the ambiguous relationship with ethnic politics of a wider scope. Chapter 5 focuses on how the anxieties of young ghetto men over manhood were tied to several conflicts between gangs and other social groups and authorities in Mathare. These cases show how shared fears of becoming redundant as men in relation to female family members, and the community at large, impinged on the relationships between gangs and different groups and organisations in Mathare. The chapter highlights that these men were not powerless victims, but were incessantly and relentlessly engaged in a negotiation of restrictive power structures. However, in contrast to dominant representations, their group strategies to claim space within the community were not always based on violent confrontations, but also on creatively navigating changing power relations.

Chapter 6 makes the link with ethnic politics and the role of gangs in a broader political context. Cases of shifting alliances help to contextualise the alleged self-evidence of ethnicity during moments of direct violence in Mathare and tease out when, why and how ethnicity temporarily moved to the fore and background in social and political relations. In this chapter, I set out to explore the experiences, motivations and legitimisations of young ghetto men with regard to violent conflict, and delve into the overarching question of why and how conflicts emerge in Mathare.

On the whole, the aim of this book – and of my research in general – is to get closer to the gang members' experiences. The challenge is to understand what gangs mean in the everyday life of Nairobi ghettos for the members themselves and also for their families and the community as a whole. By starting from their daily struggles, I aim to go beyond current stereotypes that cast these young men as thugs for hire.
CHAPTER 1: Mapping People, Places and Power in Bondeni, a Neighbourhood in the Nairobi Ghetto Mathare.

Introduction
I start this chapter by describing a walk through Bondeni, which is a neighbourhood in Mathare. During my fieldwork, I walked this route almost every day, whether alone or with young (ex-) gang members, their friends, their wives and sometimes their older relatives. Retracing this walk enables me to introduce key research participants and localities. My walk starts at the roadside restaurant owned by Kingi and his wife (Kingi was one of my main research participants and I have already mentioned him in the Introduction), which is situated near the main road where the Number 46 minibus (matatu in Kiswahili) stops. I would then walk down to the valley where I mostly met with my other research participants. As I retrace this walk, I will describe crucial locations in Bondeni, such as: the cliff that separated Upper Bondeni from Lower Bondeni; the One Touch distillation site near the river where I conducted research with alcohol gang members; the Manoki toilet that will play a central role in Chapter 5; and the bridge that connects Bondeni with another ghetto village called 4B. These places have been the sites of violent confrontations between gangs, and between gangs and community development organisations, over the past 10 years. They will therefore be analysed in the chapters below. Accordingly, this walk sets the stage for delving into both the history of Bondeni and the backgrounds of the gangs in Mathare. It also enables me to map current power relations and putative class differences, and helps to further contextualise my key questions by providing the historical backgrounds of the gangs in the area.

The type of “tour” (De Certeau 1988:118) described in this chapter was crucial to the methodology of my research, and formed an important part of my approach to “analysing biographic narratives against the grain” (Willemse 2007 – see Introduction). Indeed, walking through the ghetto with my research participants on a daily basis enabled me to grasp the meanings they attached to places, and how these shaped context-bound, temporal and intersecting enactments of the self. Their perceptions of places transformed these into spaces, by which I mean De Certeau’s “practiced places” (1988:117). With respect to space and place, De Certeau differentiates between a tour and a map (De Certeau 1988:118-122). The former is different from the latter, because it entails action and is related to space, whereas a map is informative of place. In the process of narrating a tour, a map is a point of reference and is simultaneously produced. In this multiple, fluid and shifting sense, a map is the context in which a tour has meaning, whereas a tour spatialises a map (Willemse 2007:144). Using the concept of mapping enabled me to analyse how my

1 As noted in the Introduction Mathare is comprised of 13 ghetto villages. A ghetto village is a local term that refers to specific neighbourhood areas that are represented in the local administration through the Council of Elders. Bondeni is one of the two ghetto villages where I conducted my research. Kosovo is the other one.
research participants reflected on boundaries and imagined and enacted spaces within the contexts of restricting places (Willemse et al 2009). Strikingly, the administrative maps – or any other kinds of map - of Mathare Valley (e.g. Lundine et al. 2012) do not name Bondeni. Likewise, they do not identify the various neighbourhood areas and ever-shifting boundaries that constitute Bondeni and which shape, and are shaped by, everyday social interactions and identifications; instead, they merely refer to 3A, 3B, 3C, 4A and 4B and so on, which are areas demarcated in straight lines to serve administrative purposes, and do not provide insight into the orientations to place produced by people on the ground. Walking with young gang members has given me insight into the multiple and shifting spaces they imagined, and how these, for instance, sparked temporal gender and ethnic identifications and enactments. Some of these spaces, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, became possible sites of resistance to dominant subject positions (such as the label ghetto boy). However, to provide some background to the importance of locality in processes of context bound and intersecting identifications among my research participants, I will now start my own tour.

Arriving in Bondeni
Several public minibuses from Route 46 stood in a line on a crowded corner on Ronald Ngala Street in the centre of Nairobi. Even though the Mathare ghetto is located roughly three kilometres from the city centre, its ghetto space starts where Route 46 begins. Young kamjesh, who are youths helping to lure passengers in to the matatu front in line, shouted the price and the final destination of the minibus: "Mbao (20 Kenyan Shillings in Sheng – approx. 0,20 Euro), mbao, mbao, Huruma (a low middle income neighbourhood next to Mathare), Huruma, Huruma." Their voices were intermingled with the loud purr of running engines and the reggae music coming from well-worn speakers inside the dented minivans. The exhaust fumes had coloured the pavement black. I sneaked onto the matatu at the front, bending down low enough to avoid the low roof. The seats in front of me were loose and banged against my knees every time the driver hit the brakes or took off abruptly, which he did repeatedly as he pushed his way through a growing traffic jam near Race Course Roundabout. It was difficult for me to avoid bruising to my head, hips, knees and even my back during matatu rides, and I often thought about how hard it must be for the elderly and pregnant women or those with physical disabilities. I have always travelled by matatu in Kenya, and love the energy, humour and creativity of the matatu staff and passengers. I especially enjoy observing the interactions between them. Above all, though, I love the constant exposure to reggae and dance-hall music. Nevertheless, it also is a means of transport that requires its users to be both vigilant, because of pickpockets who operate both in and outside the vans and who do not hesitate to break windows and use other forms of violence, and have a strong and flexible body and mind. This time, again, the tout (conda in Sheng) was making sexually-tinged jokes about me in Sheng to another passenger, unaware that I
understood what he was saying. Later, when I asked him in Sheng to drop me off at the petrol station near Bondeni, he laughed uncomfortably. Moreover, I had to jump out of the crowded minibus because the driver was in too much of a hurry to stop and let me out. Two women selling herbal medicines near the bus stop shouted abuse at the tout and told him to stop properly next time. According to them, not stopping was not the way to treat a lady. I made a joke about me being ‘a lady’ and thanked them.

It was nine in the morning on a Friday in February 2013, and the heat was already building up underneath the tin roof of the roadside restaurant managed by Mama J. I had just arrived back in Kenya for a brief period of fieldwork to both discuss my analyses with my research participants and observe the run-up to the 4th of March general elections in Mathare. Mama J, who was a long-term research participant, was 31, a mother of three, and had been born and raised in Bondeni. She was married to Kingi, a 36-year-old former alcohol gang leader and current social worker. He was also one of my long-term research participants. I met Kingi in 1991, when I was 16 years old and travelling on my own to work in Kenya for a second time as a youth volunteer at a youth group. This group was part of a Kenyan NGO called Safi, which worked with women and youths in Mathare. Kingi was 14 years old at the time, and we were jointly responsible for a group of 24 under-12s during a summer camp in Mombasa. Neither of us spoke much English, and had never managed a youth camp before. The director of Safi, Dr. Karanja, was with us and supervised the older youth members. She apparently had enough faith in us to put us in charge of young children who had never before travelled outside Mathare (this also applied to Kingi), let alone journeyed by train or swum in an ocean. In facing all of these new challenges, Kingi and I had become close friends. He later became one of my main research participants, and over the 20 odd years we have known each other has helped me to connect to his One Touch gang, as well as to other gangs in Bondeni.

Going down
Mama J looked at me with her beautiful, round face while she was tying her long dreadlocks into a stylish bun at the nape of her neck. In Sheng, she asked me "Are you going down, now?" She knew I was going to meet some of the alcohol gang members at the riverside. Indeed, I went there almost every day, and she always tried to stall me with a cup of tea. Given that I had just arrived back in Kenya, she knew I was more eager than usual to make my way to the riverside and see how the alcohol gang members were doing. She laughed at me. "You love going down, ha ha ha!"

Bondeni is built on a slope, and is divided into two parts: Upper Bondeni and Lower Bondeni. Mama J’s restaurant was in the former, while the distillation site on the riverbank, about half a kilometre from the main road, was in Lower Bondeni. Many residents regarded Bondeni as the oldest village in Mathare, but records are unclear on which part of Mathare was inhabited first (e.g. Etherton 1971; White 1990; Ross 1973). However, the fact that most Mathare residents, including those living in and outside Bondeni, took it to be the oldest village is significant, and is
probably due to its crucial role in the informal economy and social life of Mathare for many decades. During the colonial era, the area that eventually became known as Mathare was an Indian-owned quarry, and people settled there as squatters in its abandoned parts as early as the 1920s (Huchzermeyer 2007: 720; Etherton 1971; MuST 2012). Most of the houses were illegally erected from waste material, such as cartons, plastic, scrap metal, old timber and mud (White 1990:152; Nelson 2002; Ross 1973). During the early 1990s, I had met a few people who still lived in these endlessly re-patched houses, jokingly referred to as igloos because of their conical shape. According to some of my older research participants, it was not until the late 1960s that corrugated iron sheets became more widely available, and it sometimes took many years for structure owners, landlords or tenants to save enough money to renovate the older houses. Surprisingly, iron sheets are now almost as expensive as stone in Eastlands, Nairobi, yet people still often prefer the former, which are easily movable, because of their insecure tenures (see also Hoek-Smit 1981).

Demographic records and academic estimates vary greatly (MuST 2012), but it is safe to say that the population in Mathare rose from a few thousand during the colonial era to many tens of thousands between the 1960s and 1980s (Kabagambe & Moughtin 1983; Ross 1973; Stren 1972). The trend of rapid urbanisation, especially in informal settlements (Macharia 2003, 1992), that took off after independence in 1963 accelerated during the 1990s (Muganzi 1996; Syagga et al. 2001; Ominde 1968). Population growth in Mathare only declined slightly during the late 1990s and early 2000s, when even more ghetto areas rose up to absorb the bulk of rural-urban migrants. In 2012, Bondeni had approximately 10,000 residents (see also MuST 2012) living in both legal and illegal housing in an area that covers much less than a square kilometre. I thus take Bondeni to include parts of Kambi and as bordering Shantit. Nevertheless, precisely which neighbourhood areas make up Bondeni is constantly contested, as shifting boundaries reflect changing relations between the social groups on the ground.

After chatting and drinking tea with Mama J on that Friday morning in February 2013, I left my bag at the hotelli near Juja Road and walked along the dirt path to the Manoki cliff, about 400 metres into the ghetto. The cliff was covered by huge piles of garbage, as most residents use this spot as a dumping ground. Black smoke rose up from the heaps and clouded the air. Many years ago, people had dug steps inside the wall of the cliff for easy access, but before going down them I stopped to look at the view. This is the spot where stone flats give way to thousands of tin-roofed houses with walls made of mouldy plywood, mud, iron sheets and plastic waste. Standing on the edge of Upper Bondeni, I overlooked Lower Bondeni. I saw the river where illegal alcohol was distilled day and night, and the other side of the river where the ghetto village 4B is located. Approximately 200,000 people live in the 13 ghetto villages that comprise Mathare, which is an area of about 4 x 2 kilometres (MuST 2012), although the statistics are notoriously inaccurate. Walking down the steps, I jumped from side to side to avoid the effluent from the overflowing sewer
that snaked through a dark and narrow alley all the way to the Manoki public toilet. I greeted the women who were washing clothes at the toilet, before making my way to Mau Mau Avenue, which is a wider dirt road where most vegetable and barbecue stalls, firewood shops, bars and *hotelis* are located in Lower Bondeni.

Samii, a 26 year-old One Touch gang member I had worked with since 2009, jumped up from his stool in the shadow of a tin roof when he saw me step around the corner onto the wider road. He hugged me and slapped me on the shoulder. Three other gang members, Odhis (25-years old), Roja (28-years old) and Cosmos (26-years old), had been sitting outside the pool hall and joined us when we passed their spot. Kingi had told them I was coming and, as an excited bunch, we walked to the narrow backstreet near the green bar where *busaa* (*fermented maize porridge* in Kisiwahili) was sold. The way down to the riverside was steep, slippery and stony, and I held onto Samii’s broad shoulders to stop me from falling. At other times, I just grabbed the wooden beams coming from the mud and iron sheet houses to make my own way down without (too many) injuries. In the past, I had cut myself many times on the rusty iron sheets sticking out from these structures at eye level, learning to clean my scratches with the alcohol produced below. I always marvelled at the fact that these men were able to walk this path carrying up to 50 litres of distillation mixture, which was a balancing act that rivalled those of acrobats in a circus. Down at the distillation site, which was a few dozen metres from the dirt road and hidden from sight by a labyrinth of single room houses, I sat on a piece of firewood on the muddy ground near the gamblers. I then spent the rest of the morning catching up with the 20 alcohol distillers from the One Touch gang who had participated in my research.

As described in the Introduction, my history and long-standing friendships with many of the people in Mathare, such as Kingi and Mama J, enabled me to access the gangs that are central to this research. At the start of my PhD project, I was one of the few outsiders (people who did not come from Mathare, let alone white people from outside Kenya) able to walk freely in most parts of the ghetto and spend time at gang hangouts. Many of the members of alcohol gangs in Bondeni had met me during previous visits, and when I asked them in August 2009 to participate in this research most agreed. They wanted, as Samii voiced it, “people outside the ghetto (both Kenyans and people abroad) to know about their ghetto life.” My Sheng improved considerably during my initial fieldwork periods, when I spent days on end down by the riverside. About half of the 20 One Touch gang members I worked with spoke English, even if only to a rudimental level, and they often preferred to speak that language with me. Others had never finished secondary school, instead spending most of their time distilling and drinking alcohol and playing cards at their hangout near the distillation site. All of the young men I worked with, whether they had completed a secondary education or not, preferred to speak Sheng among themselves. Consequently, speaking Sheng was mandatory if I wanted to be able to communicate with these men and understand and be part of their interactions with each other.
Despite the many hours, days even, I have spent at the One Touch distillation spot since I started my research, I have never ceased to be impressed by the scene. On average, the site played host to 15 young men in various stages of drunkenness, gambling with cards, and a variety of distillers who worked a few metres away with steel drums placed on open wood fires. All of these young men generally looked rough, with soot on their clothes, big cuts caked with old blood on their hands and feet, and the smell of alcohol on their breath. They also acted rough, frequently shouting out harsh jokes and abuse and punching each other hard. Often, one of them would grab me by the arm and, dazed by alcohol, squeeze a little bit harder than he may have intended. On one occasion, a young man suddenly pulled me down to sit next to him, but did so with such force that I fell over straight into the open sewer that ran into the river next to drums. It was always hectic, the men were always loud and excited (as much induced by alcohol as the presence of peers), and I always had to be alert when I was down there. This was not because I was afraid, as I knew the men would never harm me, but because I had to maintain a safe distance from the drums, as explosions were not uncommon, and stay out of the sewer and out of the way of the men who sometimes fought over money that was lost through gambling.

The other reason the distillation site always captivated me concerned the way some of the young men I worked with regarded me. In the course of my fieldwork, I turned into a kind of (white) big sister or auntie to some of them. Indeed, they often referred to me as ‘siz’, and told me that they saw me as ‘neutral’ (their word), by which they meant I was in a more or less neutral position with regard to their wives and fellow gang members. At the same time, they knew I was connected to several NGOs and CBOs in Kenya, and they also thought I was rich because of my skin colour and overseas origin. All of this led them to regularly take me aside when I was at the distillation site to share with me their problems and fears. Indeed, even if I spent four days in a row down by the riverside, they would still want to talk to me in private. This, to some extent, highlights the magnitude of their problems and fears, and also reflects the fact that they did not feel they had a lot of people to talk to. At the same time, many also hoped to access opportunities by convincing me how much they needed aid, whether from me or from the organisations I was affiliated with. I always felt overwhelmed by the multiple burdens and concomitant problems that these young men had to deal with, and often felt utterly powerless in face of dying children, burned out houses and hunger. I provided assistance by setting up a project (see Chapter 3) that enabled them to address their problems better, and improve their access to social and economic opportunities collectively. Developing a project together proved to be a fruitful endeavour on many levels. First of all, it helped my research participants to gain access to opportunities previously out of reach to them. It also created a framework within which I could conduct my research. Group discussions and my interviews likewise enabled these men to conceptualise their own experiences and learn more about their individual and collective coping strategies and perspectives (see also Schrijvers 1995). Additionally, it helped me to face my own
powerlessness, even if only to a very small degree; certainly, the level of deprivation people face in ghettos like Mathare is beyond the reach of such limited initiatives.

When I finished chatting with my research participants on that Friday morning, I climbed back up to the wider dirt road – Mau Mau Avenue – where I bought a bottle of chilled water at a kiosk, as well as a small cob of roasted maize with salt, lemon and chili, and a packet of roasted groundnuts to tide me over until lunch. After a few hours at the distillation site down by the river, I was tired and covered in dust and particles from the bombs – ‘hot debris’ in Sheng - that were released by each drum 45 minutes after completion of the distillation process. The sun was hot, I was hungry and thirsty, and I needed to go to the bathroom badly, again realising the impact of the heat, dust and dirt of the ghetto on one’s body. I therefore paid five Kenyan Shillings (approx. 0.05 Euros) to use the Manoki toilet to freshen myself up. A young man was managing the toilet for Muungano Wanavijiji – a community-led organisation fighting for housing and other rights of the urban poor (Bradlow 2011; Thieme 2013; Schilderman & Ruskulis 2006). He joked that I should take a rock inside with me. I laughed and understood straightaway what he was referring to: prior to Muungano Wanavijiji renovating the toilet in late 2007, it had been managed by a variety of different gangs. Due to a lack of funds, it had been in a dismal state, and in those days, you had to carry a large rock to throw near the pit latrine and jump on to avoid stepping on piles of human faeces. It was also necessary to avoid touching the walls, as these too were covered in excrement. Today, however, the toilet is divided into cubicles with squat toilets and separate bathrooms, and the white walls are neatly tiled. The price had gone up when the toilet was renovated from two to five Kenyan Shillings, and I often wondered how people felt about using a facility that was in much better shape than the dilapidated tin-roofed houses they lived in – that is if they could afford to go to the public toilet at all.

Walking to the bridge

I stood outside the Manoki public toilet, trying to decide which route to take. I had an appointment in Kosovo, a little less than two kilometres from where I was in Bondeni, but also had to pass through 4B to meet another One Touch gang member, Motion, who had been a key participant in my research. If I walked straight from the Manoki toilet to Kosovo, I could follow Mau Mau Avenue, pass Kambi, say hi to Brayo (a 29-year-old One Touch gang leader) at his bar, and cross the bridge to Kosovo by taking a right turn after Jobless Corner in Village 2. This was the shortest possible route, but I wanted to see Motion in 4B and so took a right instead of a left. Near the blue kiosk, I met Mama Buda, an older lady who was one of the bar owners who worked with the One Touch gang. Her son Buda had been my research participant during the fieldwork for my Master’s research project, and I had interviewed him again on several occasions for my PhD. She kissed me loudly on the cheeks and told me to buy her a bag of maize flour. I obliged willingly, even though I knew that, despite her tattered appearance, she and her family were influential stakeholders in the lucrative
*chang’aa* (illegal alcohol) industry. As a consequence, she was very able to buy her own maize meal.

Buying groceries or lunch for friends, family members and elders is regarded as a sign of respect, especially when the buyer is considered to be better off, and people were not shy of repeatedly reminding me, a white outsider, of that custom. As a consequence, I often had to carry extra money with me to meet these expectations. Yet, the people living in the ghetto had similar expectations of each other. Indeed, I observed this up close when Kingi left the One Touch gang in 2007 and later became a social worker at Safi; as a result of these changes in his life, his friends and family began to ask more of him, and he shared with me that he only went down to Mau Mau Avenue and the riverside if he could afford to buy lunch for at least a few friends and relatives. He told me that he could not refuse such requests, because it would harm his reputation and social status as a man; he wanted to maintain the image that he was on the way up, and buying family members and friends groceries and lunch was part of this project.

After buying the maize meal and flour for Mama Buda, I bought a few extra bags, because I knew I would pass Shosho Kingi, who was Kingi’s very old and ailing grandmother. Shosho (‘grandmother’ in Sheng) stood in the doorway of her red, rusting iron sheet house that doubled up as a bar. She had lost part of her sight in the past few years, and also had problems with walking and remembering things. Nevertheless, she still sold alcohol in her house-cum-bar day in day out. Behind her, I saw a few older men smoking and drinking in the unlit room. Shosho talked to me in the Kikuyu language while I gave her the groceries, and I told her in Kiswahili – it was generally considered to be rude to speak Sheng to older people – that to my shame I still did not really speak the Kikuyu language well. As always, she answered that I should marry a strong Kikuyu man.

I continued walking along the wider dirt road to the bridge. Here and there, people greeted me from the roadside, where food stalls were set up in the shadow of the houses, away from the scorching sun. I hit a fork in the road near the Mulika Mwizi (meaning ‘shine a light on a thief’ in Kiswahili), which is a tall light that comes on as soon as the sun goes down to light up a wide area during the dark ghetto nights. At times, people felt that the bright light was interfering with their activities, and so turned it off by shining an equally bright light into its detection device. This enabled them to go about their business without too much police intrusion.

The area near the bridge, which is locally termed Daraja Mbili (meaning ‘two bridges’ in Kiswahili, as there used to be two bridges), is a notorious crime spot, and I had just heard that the day before a man from 4B was robbed of his belongings and stabbed to death early in the morning. Despite steady economic growth (World Bank 2013), crime had increased considerably in Kenya as a result of soaring food prices after 2010 (*e.g.* Kiberenge 2011; Njagih 2011; Musembi & Scott-Villiers 2014; Anyanzwa & Kamau 2013), and this had disproportionately affected marginalised groups in the country. Many people on their way to or coming back from work have
to pass this bridge on a daily basis, and it is located far enough from the frequent police patrols on Juja Road to make it a hotspot for petty theft an even armed robbery. People were robbed every day at the bridge, and murder had become an almost weekly occurrence. This was the main cause of the more recent tensions between the two ghetto villages of Bondeni and 4B. However, tensions between these two neighbourhoods in Mathare had a long history, to which I will turn below. Most of the thieves operating near the bridge that connected Bondeni and 4B were considered locally to come from an area adjacent to Bondeni, called Shantit, whereas most of the victims were widely taken to be residents of 4B, including by residents from Bondeni and Shantit.

Daraja Mbili had also been the battlefield for, allegedly, Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga supporters during the 2007/8 post-election violence. Later, the military police claimed that they had had a difficult time quelling the violence because of the labyrinthine infrastructure of houses and alleyways in this area. In early 2009, the government demolished many of the houses near the bridge to create an open space and construct another wide dirt road parallel to Mau Mau Avenue that led to Mabatini village. According to local residents I interviewed in August 2009, the official reason for this was that this space and the new road were necessary to allow fire engines to access houses further down the valley near the riverside, although this was met with ridicule by most of them. Instead, it was clear to them that the government wanted better access to crime hotspots to improve its control of gang activities and violent clashes. Certainly, no one had ever seen a fire engine inside this part of Mathare, and this did not change after the demolitions. Unfortunately, only a few of the families that resided near the bridge had been given even a day’s notice of the government’s intentions, whereas those who had lived along the planned road had been rudely awoken at night by bulldozers. Thousands of people were affected by these evictions and demolitions. Four years later, the open space and the new road still looked void of the normal hustle and bustle that marks Mathare street life.

A house is not a home
Before I could turn left to cross the bridge at Daraja Mbili during my walk in February 2013, I heard someone shout my name. Karanch stood in front of his house and approached me with a school exercise book. He was a 24-year-old alcohol distiller from Shantit who identified as Kikuyu. He was also a gang leader and a father of two. He told me that his friend, a 17-year-old thief from Shantit, had been beaten to death by a crowd (a practice that is locally termed ‘mob justice’) a few days earlier when he had been caught stealing along Juja Road in the evening. Karanch asked me to contribute to the funeral and write my name in the book, along with the amount of my contribution, for future reference by the funeral committee. I asked him if the boy still had family and where he would be buried. Karanch told me that his friend only had a few relatives in Mathare, and that he would be buried at Langata Cemetery. His mother was an unmarried sex worker and did not have land or relatives in the rural
area, and he had not known his father. Langata Cemetery was commonly considered to be the 'poor people's cemetery' on the other side of the city, and many people from Mathare expressed shame over the prospect of being buried there. Indeed, Mathare residents who still owned land in rural areas, or who had parents or grandparents living in the rural area, preferred to be buried near other family graves on that land. The dream of many older people I met in Mathare, regardless of their ethnic background, was to buy their own land in a rural area upon which they wanted to build their own house to retire to and, eventually, be buried there. In an interview I conducted with him in April 2011, Karanch explained to me the reason for this dream. He pointed fervently at his dilapidated house, his eyebrows knitted into a displeasing frown:

Even though this house is here for more than twenty years, it is not a home. Not our home. We come to the city to work and many of us are born here, like me, in this ghetto. But this is not where we can live. Of course I need a land to build my own house but for me it's okay to build my house in Nairobi. What can I do in ocha (rural area in Sheng)? There is no business there. You cannot call this... here... a life. What life? To see your children play in mitaro (sewers in Kiswahili)? We pay rent but the houses are from mabati ('iron sheet' in Kiswahili), ha ha ha, when it rains, it rains inside...we have nothing here. You saw what they did when they widened the road, no notice, and many people had to leave...mara hiyo hiyo (instantly in Sheng). Where can you go? This is also what my mother tells me, this is what it always has been, we cannot stay here...we are here to go!

Right from the onset, Mathare has been a locality where people resided as illegal squatters (White 1990; Nelson 2002; Syagga et al. 2001), and in this vein most residents considered the ghetto to be a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs in popular discourse), which is a term that became widely popular in Mathare after the 2007/8 post-election violence (e.g. Adeagbo & Iyi 2011). Many of the earlier rural-urban migrants came from other illegal squatter communities in the Rift Valley, where former farm workers had been displaced from European farms during the 1940s as a result of the gradual mechanisation of farm work (Kanogo 1987). In addition, the colonial government detained large sections of what it considered to be the 'Kikuyu' population, in an attempt to defeat the rural and urban support base of the Mau Mau freedom fighters during a State of Emergency (between 1952-56 – Elkins 2005:308; Anderson 2005a:90). Upon their release, many of these ex-detainees could not return to the Native Reserves, as most of these areas were overpopulated, while other places had been confiscated by the different authorities that had collaborated with the colonial government, with local chiefs being an example (Rutten & Owuor 2009; Anderson 2005a). As a consequence, released from
prison, these men and women (but especially women – see below) had no choice but to join illegal squatter communities in either rural or urban areas (cf. Nelson 2002: 238).

The shared experiences of being a squatter in Mathare, which involved living in dilapidated and crime-ridden ghetto villages and suffering recurrent and often violent evictions (cf. Otiso 2002; Alam et al. 2005; Lamba 2005), have informed a shared sense of displacement among residents. People live in constant fear of losing their small single room house without anywhere else to go. Most people in Mathare, like Karanch, do not own a house in the urban environment or have land in the rural area to retire to. Despite the fact that most do have a (rented) roof over their heads inside the ghetto, they consider themselves to be homeless. Feeling stuck, which was how many of the ghetto residents described their situation to me, deepened this sense of feeling displaced; they felt stuck somewhere halfway between the rural area and the city. Mathare has historically been perceived by its residents as a stepping-stone to the city for rural (and often poor) migrants, i.e. it is seen as a place to settle temporarily and start working to provide for family in the rural area. A popular saying, however, was Mathare, ni rahisi kuingia na ni ngumu kutoka (in Kiswahili ‘it is easy to enter Mathare and hard to leave’). Interestingly, the same slogan was often used to describe Mombasa. The term captures three popular sentiments with regard to these localities. Firstly, both potentially provide access to (illegal) income-generating opportunities (sex work, drug trade etc.) for newcomers from the rural area. Secondly, it is easy and cheap to access drugs, alcohol and so on, making it accessible for people wanting to have fun, although it is also possible for them to quickly lose the little they earn. Thirdly, social relationships are rife with jealousy and competition. All of my young, male research participants expressed the desire to move out of the ghetto and live on an estate – by which they mean a neighbourhood with stone, permanent houses, indoor plumbing and, often, organised security guards, although only a few succeeded in doing so. Many shared a longing to buy a plot in one of the lower middle-income suburbs and build their own house, as this epitomised to them the achievement of attaining ‘senior’ manhood. Up to the time of writing this book, and in the course of my research, which spanned over five years, only seven of the 40 young (ex-)gang members I worked with moved away from Mathare, with five of them buying their own plot in Nairobi and being in the process of, or had already finished, constructing their own house there. Others invested in rural areas where relatives still resided, and continued to aspire to move out of the ghetto and live on a Nairobi estate. Yet the money they invested in developing their rural homes was one of the factors that hampered them in realising their dream to move to such a place. Most of the research participants, however, lack the finances to invest in anything at all, and barely make a living.

---

2 Home, for the young men I conducted research with, can mean a variety of things. It can mean a rural area where parents or other relatives live or were born, or, more generally, where many members of a particular ethnic group live with those with whom they identify.
Karanch regarded himself as a third-generation squatter in the Rift Valley, and a second-generation squatter in Mathare, with most of his relatives still living in the former, which he now considered to be his rural home. In this way, Karanch negotiated the dominant discourse on ethnic homes by positioning himself somewhat differently from the leading ideas on these homes and ethnic belonging in Kenya. Indeed, instead of merely constructing a sense of belonging to a specific rural area that was generally associated with his ethnic background, Karanch aspired to revoke his squatter status by building his own house on his own land in the capital city Nairobi. Unlike many of the older people in Mathare, he and countless of his peers did not envisage going back to the rural area to live with family. However, in conjunction with these older residents, they also did not regard Mathare as a place to stay. Remarkably, Karanch still wanted to be buried in the rural area. Indeed, he expressed great frustration over the fact that he only had distant relatives living in the rural area, and as such faced the prospect of having to be buried at the Langata Cemetery in Nairobi city. This was not uncommon among the young men who participated in my research; many of them, with multiple ethnic backgrounds, did not imagine a strong sense of belonging to the rural area, but they nevertheless still expressed anxieties over the prospect of being buried in the city. They even told me that they feared being forgotten, forever lost in the anonymity of this cemetery. In the following chapters, I will delve further into the shared sense of feeling stuck and in-between, as many gang members felt multiply displaced and were guided by a fear of being redundant and, as a consequence, easy to forget; they longed to be connected to family, to land, to social groups and to the community in which they lived, and this longing shaped the varied processes of gang formation among them.

**Emerging class divisions between Upper and Lower Bondeni**

That Friday morning in 2013, standing near the bridge and talking to Karanch, I looked up at the tenement buildings\(^3\) high up on the cliffs behind the Manoki toilet. Residents in these flats enjoyed security of tenure as long as they could adhere to the often stringent rules stipulated by the landlords, who were largely unregulated by state authorities (Huchzermeyer 2007). These high-rises, however, were built on private land, and their presence in Mathare – an informal settlement mostly built on government land – epitomised the complicated power structures in this particular part of the ghetto. Despite the fact that the Mathare ghetto is an informal settlement where most people reside illegally, assets such as (non-permanent) structures and land constituted the foundation of local power relations. Bondeni is a prime example of how formal and informal assets were created in unplanned settlements, and how this led to intricate and often violent power struggles between different social groups and individuals.

---

\(^3\) The term tenement is used by Huchzermeyer (2007) to describe multi-storey stone buildings in Mathare and other Nairobi ghetto neighbourhoods that have one and two-room apartments that are generally rented by lower income families and are privately owned.
During the early colonial period, a majority of the landlords in Mathare were women who lived and worked as sex workers in nearby Pumwani and Eastleigh (cf. White 1990:195). They invested their earnings in renting out illegal structures in Mathare. Many of these women had migrated from rural areas – mainly from the Central Provinces, but also from the coast and Western Kenya - for a variety of reasons. Some women had been widowed at a young age or before having children, and could not return to their father’s homestead in the rural area due to poverty. Others had travelled to the capital city to provide for the nuclear family in the rural area, and others still had travelled to Nairobi in search of adventure (White 1990:2). From the 1940s onwards, and especially during World War II, more and more women moved from Pumwani and Eastleigh to settle in Mathare to sell sex “from the comfort of their homes” (White 1990). Mathare was located closer to several military and police bases than Pumwani and Eastleigh. Accordingly, the influx of soldiers during the war attracted a growing settlement of single women who engaged in sex work. In the early decades of this work in Mathare, men mostly visited the houses of the sex workers to spend the night, eat, sleep and bathe, thus interacting with the women in a way that resembled popular marriage practices. Indeed, the men were also often referred to as 'husbands for the night.' This form of sex work, termed malaya by White (1990), was developed by women in Pumwani and Eastleigh and became the dominant practice among most sex workers in Mathare. Even today, sex work is one of the main sources of income for many women in Mathare, and there are still some who practice the malaya form of their profession.

Ever since the onset of illegal settlement in Mathare, the relationships between structure owners, landlords and tenants have been rife with conflict (e.g. Huchzermeyer 2007, 2008). An Indian company sold informal permissions to squatters to build illegal structures on exhausted sites of the quarry. These permissions were not recognised by the colonial or, later, the Kenyan government. Accordingly, such transactions allowed a structure owner to illegally build a house on a vacant piece of land in Mathare that she did not own. Such a woman could live in this house or even rent it out to other single women (often fellow sex workers) and become a landlord. However, she could not claim any property rights and was always in danger of eviction. In the early days, many women lived in the structure they had constructed themselves, and gradually built rooms adjacent to these single room homes to let out and enable them to diversify their income strategies (White 1990). Other women lived and worked in Pumwani and Eastleigh, which were neighbourhoods near Mathare, and rented out all of the structures in the latter to supplement their income from sex work. In the latter case, she was considered to be an ‘absentee landlord’ (cf. Kigochie 2001:226) by her tenants. Some of the owners of

---

4 Other sex workers in Mathare today work in bars and brothels (both in the ghetto and its environs and the city centre), while some walk the streets in the city centre, and others invite clients to their houses near the ghetto bars. Most of the women I worked with during my fieldwork worked from their houses and solicited clients from the many chang’aa dens in Bondeni for as little as 50 Kenyan Shillings.
the illegal structures who lived and worked in other areas leased them out to a middleman, usually a broker, who would then often be regarded as a substitute landlord by the tenants. These relationships were still relatively clear-cut, as most people knew each other by face in the early days (Ross 1973). Over the course of decades, however, these relationships became increasingly opaque as more brokers came in, increasing the distance between structure owners, absentee landlords and tenants. During my fieldwork, I observed relationships between structure owners and tenants that were mediated by as many as three brokers. Some of these structure owners owned a vast number of single room houses in many different ghetto villages, and yet were far removed from the ghetto, which was why there was a need for different brokers to manage such relationships on the ground.

Even if the majority of structure owners and landlords in Mathare were women during the colonial era (White 1990), men also permanently settled there, with some of them also becoming powerful landlords. Nevertheless, women continued to outnumber men both as household heads and illegal property owners. Like many of the women, most of the men who worked in the city aspired to return to the rural area. However, it was easier for them to do so as they were more likely to inherit land. Many men went to the urban area during the colonial era in search of work (as gardeners, clerks and so on) to enable them to earn a monetary income that was required for them to pay taxes to the colonial government (Kanogo 1987:9). Some of these migrants could not return to the rural area for the lack of land (Kanogo 1987:114), whereas others preferred the opportunities and freedom that the city environment provided. Many of these men married and settled in ghetto areas such as Mathare. A few of them even became powerful structure owners and players in local authorities (such as in Councils of Village Elders – see more below).

Prior to independence in 1963, both male and female landlords bought from Indian owners the informal permissions to build structures in Mathare, although the men organised their houses differently to the women; instead of adding houses in a row-format, as the women did, these men built micro-villages (locally dubbed homesteads) that were shielded from other groups or rows of houses by Napier grass and thickets. These men often lived inside these clusters of houses with family and friends who had also migrated from the same rural village. Kingi’s (absent) father had been one of the men who had obtained permission from the Indian owners to live there and build (non-permanent) houses on a piece of land in the quarry, and he constructed a micro-village during the 1960s. Single women, most of whom were sex workers, lived in houses (both as owners and tenants) that were scattered or built in rows amidst these micro-villages. Commercial interests first and foremost propelled the male landlords to construct enclosed grounds to mark off their turfs. Several of the older men and women in Mathare explained to me that the particular set up may have also been derived from a desire to replicate rural village life, and to shut out the putative immoralities of the sex work that was practised in plain view in Mathare.
The power relationships between structure owners, landlords and tenants in Bondeni became ever more complex during the first decade after independence in 1963. As discussed above, this decade was marked by rapid urbanisation (Muganzi 1996; Syagga et al. 2001; Ross 1973), with ghetto areas around Nairobi city centre multiplying and increasingly being regarded by the state as health hazards and surging crime hubs. To address these and other issues, the Kenyatta government initiated several land and settlement schemes (mainly in the Rift Valley and other rural areas, but also in certain urban areas) to encourage squatters (many of whom had Kikuyu backgrounds) to purchase land (cf. Huchzermeyer 2007:722; Anderson & Lochery 2008). In the urban areas, the main aim of this initiative was to impede the proliferation of informal settlements by encouraging private real estate development (Etherton 1971). However, only a small part of Mathare (including a part of the area we now know as Bondeni) became available for private ownership, as the city council considered the rest of this informal settlement to be unfit for (permanent) dwellings. It is for this reason that the council has never, or only on a piecemeal basis, provided services such as sanitation, garbage collection, electricity and water (cf. MuST 2012).

The strip of land between Mau Mau Avenue and the riverside was designated as a river reserve, and as such remained government land. Nevertheless, up and coming structure owners continued to illegally build rooms to live in or rent out there. This is where Shosho Kingi has added eight rooms adjacent to her own single room house since the late 1960s. During my more recent fieldwork periods (2011-2013), she was renting out each room for 1200 Kenyan Shillings (around 10 Euros) a month to supplement the monthly revenues obtained from her home bar. This area was prone to flooding during the rainy season, and several people have been swept away and killed in the past by suddenly rising water levels. The split between private land (mostly in Upper Bondeni) and government land near the river (that is Lower Bondeni) created a visible division between low- and lowest-income families within this ghetto village. In socio-economic terms, people in Mathare commonly distinguished first between West- and Eastlands in Nairobi, which they described as masonko (‘rich people or bosses’ in Sheng), vis à vis masufferers (‘poor people’ in Sheng). Eastlands was further divided between low middle-income households (wasee wa esto in Sheng, which denotes people who live in stone houses in formal neighbourhoods), low-income households (mapunk ya ghetto in Sheng, which means people who live in ghettos but in stone houses) and lowest income households (wasee wa down in Sheng, which means people who live near the river down in Mathare). These distinctions were based on both family income and lifestyle. According to this view, the low-middle income families resided mostly in neighbourhoods such as Eastleigh, Huruma, Kariobangi and Umoja, and during my most recent fieldwork periods these families generally earned between 15,000 and 25,000 Kenyan Shillings a month. Lower-income families, meanwhile, earned between 8,000 and 15,000 Kenyan Shillings per month on average, and low-income families from as little as
2,500 to around 8,000 Kenyan Shillings. As illustrated by Shosho Kingi's circumstances, not all lower-income households were located in Upper Bondeni. She easily made around 13,000 Kenyan Shillings a month through collecting rent and selling alcohol, but chose to reside in Lower Bondeni near her houses and the sites where the alcohol was distilled and consumed. She was, however, an exception; most of the individuals and families who made more than 8000 Kenyan Shillings moved to Upper Bondeni to take up residence in either an upgraded iron sheet house with concrete (instead of dirt) floors for at least 2000 Kenyan Shillings per month, or a single-room house in a tenement building for as much as 3500 (and sometimes even 4000). Moving up in Bondeni enhanced a person's social status, and only a few individuals chose to stay down and hide their growing economic means. The single-room apartments in the tenement buildings were not much bigger in size than the iron sheet and mud houses in Lower Bondeni, yet they often had better sanitary facilities as the tenants shared a toilet and water tap with only eight to 12 other families. These stone buildings were also safer (harder to break into and no risk of flooding), and were less plagued by pests like cockroaches, rats and snakes than the dilapidated houses near the river.

Landowners and authority structures in Bondeni
At the time when the Kenyatta government launched the land and settlement schemes in the early 1960s, male and female landlords and structure owners organised themselves in land buying cooperatives (Etherton 1971; Syagga et al., 2001). This enabled them to legally purchase land in the area now known as Upper Bondeni. The most influential land-buying cooperative here was Bondeni Cooperatives (bondeni means 'valley' or 'low land' in Kiswahili, referring to the gorge-like morphology of Mathare), and as time went by the village became known as Bondeni. A fourth category of landowners was thus added to the already complex mix of (illegal) structure owners, tenants, and (absentee) landlords. Unsurprisingly, however, the members of the cooperative (the new landowners) became the most influential group in Bondeni.

---

5 On 18 December 2013, 01.00 Euro equalled 118,30 Kenyan Shillings, meaning that the lowest income families in Mathare survived on less than 22 Euros a month, whereas the top of the lower income families there earned around 125 Euros. Rent in Lower Bondeni (in the period 2010 to 2012) varied between 500 (for a mere shack made out of waste) and 1200 Kenyan Shillings (for an iron sheet with electricity connections), which was equal to about 4 to 10 Euros). Rent in Upper Bondeni (between 2010 and 2012) varied from 2000 Kenyan Shillings (around 16 Euros) to 4000 Kenyan Shillings (or about 33 Euros). Electricity and water were not included in these rents, each of which could amount to around 400 Kenyan Shillings or 3.5 Euros a month (especially when one was forced to use illegal electricity connections and public toilets). The minimum daily food expenditure for a family of four was up to 200 Kenyan Shillings, which amounted to a total for one month of 6000 Kenyan Shillings (around 50 Euros) for any family living in Mathare. Added to this were school fees, transport costs, hospital bills and so on, enabling one to understand that even the top of the lower income families were struggling to make ends meet. In the rest of this book, I equate 1 Euro to approximately 100 Kenyan Shillings, because exchange rates fluctuated enormously during my research period. However, this rate is an easy to use, but very conservative, average.
The Bondeni landowners, both women and men, had a major hold over the Council of Village Elders (wazee wa kijiji in Kiswahili), and accordingly became close partners of the local chief. The Office of the President appointed the chiefs. This institution was part of the provincial administration, and operated as its local representative in wards. Each constituency was comprised of different wards that were presided over by chiefs. Mathare was part of the Starehe constituency until 2013, and was divided into different wards. One of these was Mabatini, which is where Bondeni is located. After the elections in March 2013, this ward became part of the Mathare constituency. This particular government structure was a remnant of the colonial era, and was continued by governments after independence to assert presidential control directly on the ground (Dafe 2009). Chiefs had their own police force (the administration police or AP in short) with a uniform that resembled what soldiers wore. The AP and the Council of Village Elders, locally dubbed ‘eyes of the chief’, assisted the chiefs in maintaining control of their wards (Dafe 2009; Huchzermeyer & Omenya 2006). In Bondeni, most local residents regarded the village elders as “career informers” who reported on every little thing that happened in the Mabatini ward, and even conjured up events, in return for a substantial fee. Many landowners exerted control over the Council of Elders through bribes and other types of reciprocity. Similar to the local chief, these wealthier landowners also benefitted from knowing the details of what was happening inside the ghetto, given that many of them had ceased to reside in Bondeni. In fact, many of the shareholders of the cooperative bought land and built stone houses in wealthier neighbourhoods in Nairobi, such as Kahawa West, where there is still an area called 'little Mathare' (this is a place where first-generation rural-urban migrants to Mathare and their off-spring live in relative luxury). Many of these wealthy people (masonko or wadosi in Sheng) still earn money through chang’aa and other businesses located in Mathare, and continue to have strong ties with the village elders. Accordingly, the elders looked out for the interests of both the chief and the landowners. Curiously, these interests did not differ all that much, and both groups had a high stake involvement in the illegal alcohol industry, as will become clear below.

It did not take long before the Bondeni Cooperative became untenable as an organisation. In particular, the cooperative set-up became overstretched due to too many members, which considerably muddied decision-making processes. This led to the steep inflation of land prices, which spurred Bondeni Cooperatives on to eventually registering as a company called Bondeni Properties (cf. Etherton 1971; Amis 1988). The confusion during the transition period enabled two men, both of whom were highly influential and wealthy shareholders of the old cooperative, to deceive other members with false title deeds and land claims. Wealthier shareholders from outside Mathare joined in with their multiple scams, and this led to a period of intense speculation on land, rent and the construction of tenement buildings in Upper Bondeni. The consequences are still visible in the make-up of Bondeni today, as much of the privately owned land is still underdeveloped and continues to play host to non-
permanent dwellings. This was not how the government had intended the land and settlement schemes to play out. Cooperatives and landowner companies have also come into being in many other areas in Eastlands, Nairobi, where land-buying collectives have been formed by squatters to legally buy land from the government since the 1960s (such as in Mlango Kubwa in Mathare). Questions thus arise as to why Bondeni Properties seems to have been more plagued by scams and internal wrangles than other land-buying collectives, and why this has led to the underdevelopment of private properties.

There are four factors that contributed to the uneven and underdevelopment of Bondeni, and so to its highly complicated and volatile power structures. Several officials from the Pamoja Trust and the Muungano Support Trust, two NGOs working for land rights for the urban poor, shared these reasons with me during numerous fieldwork periods from 2009-2014. Indeed, we had many discussions on the uneven power relations and concomitant social divisions in Mathare and their effects on community development (see also MuST 2012). In the view of these officials, the first factor was the problem of shareholders. In particular, the cooperative, and later Bondeni Properties, had a high number of defaulting shareholders who had never finished paying for specific plots. However, the company lacked the finances to buy them out. As a consequence, these shareholders were trapped, as they could not sell the land before they paid off their debts. Many of these shareholders survived and paid off the mounting interest by renting out non-permanent structures on these plots. The second factor, in the view of the NGO officials, concerned the consequences of the said scams. Many shareholders could simply not get a loan from the bank to build permanent houses or flats on their land given that there were multiple title deeds for particular plots. Indeed, to this day, there are still various court cases going on (some of which have already been running for decades) that are trying to establish who the legitimate owners are of many of the underdeveloped plots in Bondeni. The third factor pertains to the multiple junctures of violence (some of which were related to the court cases and scams) in the area that brought a halt to construction projects and turned certain plots into gang turf. Yet, all of these factors are, to some extent, related to the fourth: the emergence of bar owners and alcohol bosses in Bondeni.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Bondeni gradually became the epicentre of the production and distribution in Nairobi of chang’aa, an illegally distilled alcohol, and many landowners also became powerful bar owners and alcohol bosses. Soon, this became the most lucrative industry in Mathare to invest in, and many landowners diverted funds meant for construction to boost their own illegal alcohol imperium. Non-permanent housing and mazes of narrow alleyways even benefitted this new and highly illegal industry in unforeseen ways, for example by completely hiding the distillation sites from public view and providing a continuous workforce of poor and young men.
Alcohol, money and power

In Mathare, most people regarded Bondeni as being synonymous with illegal alcohol production, and almost all of the businesses located there were indeed to some extent related to chang’aa. During all of my fieldwork periods, there was a major shortage of firewood in adjacent ghetto villages in Mathare, even though every other small business on Mau Mau Avenue in Bondeni sold large quantities of this wood. Both men and women owned these businesses, although the latter were in a slight majority in this sector. These firewood sellers had contacts with construction companies and arranged for frequent early morning deliveries. Old wood from scaffolding at construction sites was transported to the area in trucks so large they could barely enter the ghetto. Every day, these trucks dropped off mountains of firewood intended to fuel the widespread and constant distillation of alcohol at the sites near the river. At the same time, young men in search of work hung around these businesses from sunrise to midday to help offload the bulks of firewood and chop them into smaller pieces in return for a small stipend.

The scale of production and distribution today is, as noted, a surprisingly recent phenomenon. In earlier days, women often combined sex work with distilling and selling busaa (‘fermented maize porridge’ in Kiswahili – Nelson 2002). According to a few wealthy (both male and female) bar owners I talked to, all of whom had started out as alcohol smugglers during the 1980s, the influx of migrants from Western Kenya had boosted the selling of chang’aa; according to them, these migrants preferred chang’aa to busaa. When busaa was declared illegal by government decree in 1983 (Nelson 1997 – the decree was aimed at curbing illegal substance production and consumption in ghetto areas), most women turned to combining sex work with distilling and selling chang’aa instead. Indeed, it was easier to distil chang’aa inside their houses, thus avoiding detection, than was the case with busaa. Making busaa involved forming yeast and sprout grain kernels, cooking them into a thick cake with large quantities of maize flour while adding a little water, roasting this cake-type mixture on two-metre wide tin trays, and then making the porridge needed for the fermentation process. A large part of the preparation of busaa, such as drying the sprouted kernels and baking the dried and fermented cake, happened outside the small houses, whereas chang’aa could be distilled using a basin of cool water on a large pot or half a steel drum on a paraffin stove inside the tiny single room houses in which these women lived. Older Mathare residents also explained that the ongoing rural-urban migration had led to higher demand for this particular type of cheap liquor in up and coming ghettos in Nairobi. Above all, these women soon found that the profit margins were much higher, especially in conjunction with a growing customer base.

Sadly, these profit margins have fallen significantly since the 1980s. Right now, bar owners make 1,720 Kenyan Shillings (about 14 Euros) per drum (see more below). It is very difficult to compare this to the profit margins during the 1980s and 1990s, because of steep inflation rates and a lack of proper records. However, many
claim that profits have fallen by at least 50% over the past decade. People often explained this to me by pointing to the convergence of rising food prices (especially sugar) and the need to increasingly pay police bribes since the early 2000s. In the experience of many, the blatant corruption of the Nyayo era (when President Moi was in power between 1978 and 2002) meant that the police and city council officials had ample opportunity to exact bribes from many different sources. The crackdown on corruption in plain view – that is in public spaces in the city centre – led, in their experience, to a direct increase in corrupt transactions inside the ghettos and out of the limelight. Nowadays, at least three different police squads visit the distillation sites on a daily basis to extract bribes, whereas before there were only one or two.

Chang’aa is made of ngutu, which is a dark brown waste product from the manufacture of sugar. It resembles molasses, but is more crude and solid. This leftover substance is put in a drum with busaa and 180 litres of water. Nowadays, people also put in something they call dawa ('medicine' in Kiswahili), which I was told by a few bar owners is a formaldehyde powder that is secretly bought from mortuaries. As it is always packed in brown paper sachets without a label, I have not been able to verify this. I was also told that this powder was used to speed up the distillation process. In the old days, people waited at least seven days for the distillation mixture (kangara or kango in Sheng) to be ready, but the dawa now reduced the wait to less than four days. I was able to see the difference between the drums that contained this powder and those that did not. When the distillers scooped the bubbling distillation mixture out of the drums containing dawa, their inner walls were clear of all of the rust that usually coated the sides. Drums without dawa remained as rusty as ever. When asked, the distillers assured me that the large amount of rust inside the mixture would not enter the end product, and nor would the dawa, at least according to them. I asked the same question about the numerous rats and other pests that were around; the drums were uncovered to improve the fermentation process, and it was common for pests to fall in and drown. Again I was repeatedly assured that the rust, dawa and pests would all remain inside the distillation drum, and the only thing that would emerge was a lovely strong 'gin' (one of the numerous names for chang'aa in Sheng). I have had a sip of chang’aa on three occasions, and it did resemble a strong type of gin with a thick sugary aftertaste. Nevertheless, I remain deeply sceptical about the hygiene of the fermentation and distillation processes.
Table: One 180-litre drum of Kangara in January 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Kenyan shillings</th>
<th>Euros</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ngutu (sugar waste)</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuni (firewood)</td>
<td>500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busaa (fermented maize porridge and yeast)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawa (formaldehyde)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bribes to policemen</td>
<td>900 (usually less when shared with other bosses)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 gang members to distil</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distillation costs for 1 drum</td>
<td>3,780</td>
<td>Approx.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A drum of 180 litres produces 60 litres of chang’aa. The first 15 litres are called biko and these are more expensive than the regular chang’aa.

Table: Sales and profits on 60 litres of chang’aa (including biko) in January 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Kenyan Shillings</th>
<th>Euros</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45 litres of chang’aa</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 litres of biko</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit from sale</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distillation costs</td>
<td>-3,780</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profit</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,720</strong></td>
<td>Approx. 14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the decreasing profit margins, Bondeni and Shantit had approximately 45 to 50 bar owners and wholesalers making between 100 and 400 Euros a day during 2010 (before the legalisation of chang’aa in September 2010 – BBC 2010). As well as these wealthy bar owners (many of whom were also landowners, landlords and shareholders in Bondeni Properties), this village had about 200 smaller to small bar owners who made between 20 and 50 Euros a week. In a very careful estimate, it is likely that more than 300,000 Euros a month circulated in a ghetto village where most families earned no more than 60 Euros a month, which was much less than the earnings of even the smallest bar owner. The concentration of wealth in the hands of just a few people who were living and working in Bondeni, and the enormous gap

---

6 If I consider that during 2010 a minimum of 45 bar owners/wholesalers earned on average 200 Euros per day (between 100 and 400), the total monthly earnings of this group could have amounted to 270,000 Euros a month. In the same period, the larger group of roughly 200 smaller to small bar owners and distributors earned 30 Euros a week on average (between 20 and 50 a week), thus making a total monthly revenue of 28,000 Euros. If I then take into account the fluctuating exchange rates and the fact that I based this careful estimate on relatively low averages, I can tentatively conclude that between 2011 and 2013 the total income of the chang’aa industry in Bondeni, Mathare, alone was close to 300,000 Euros per month.
between the monthly earnings of the poorest and richest families there, are good indications of the extreme inequality within local power structures. Ethnicity became increasingly implicated in both people's experiences of this inequality and in the junctures of violence that were sparked as a result.

**Kikuyu versus Luo ghetto villages?**

In October 2005, one of my research participants, Buda, described Bondeni, with visible pride on his face, as follows: “We are from Bondé (Sheng for Bondeni). Ha ha ha. This side. Our community is Kikuyu because we are Kikuyu. Across the two bridges is Luo territory and this?...This is Kikuyu.” Interestingly, Buda has a father with a Luo background, who he is named after, and a mother with a Kikuyu background. Despite his multiple ethnic backgrounds and Luo names, Buda identified mostly, but not always, as Kikuyu. This emanated from the growing conflation between ethnicity and locality and between ethnicity and local notions of class in Mathare over the years. I will explore this further in the following chapters, but in brief the ghetto village 4B was locally considered to have (by residents from both 4B and Bondeni) a majority of residents who came from Western Kenya and who identified as Luo. Bondeni, meanwhile, was widely regarded as a more ethnically mixed village with a slight majority of residents who identified as Kikuyu. Bondeni was also considered to be a wealthier ghetto village.

Although people referred to ghetto villages in certain ethnic terms (cf. Dafe 2009), and despite the fact that specific ethnic groups were considered to dominate particular areas, this does not imply actual homogeneity on the ground. All of the ghetto villages in Mathare were, to some extent, characterised by ethnic diversity. Moreover, the Kikuyu-Luo binary that people drew on to describe certain villages eschews the fact that people with a myriad of ethnic backgrounds lived in Mathare, and also glosses over the ghetto villages that were locally considered to be dominated by people with ethnic backgrounds other than Kikuyu or Luo (such as Gisu, Kenyan Somali, Somali and Borana and Oromo). This begs the question of why people in Mathare mostly drew on the dominant Kikuyu-Luo binary to describe ghetto villages and explain tensions. The answer to this question is twofold. It is first connected to the prominence of Bondeni in the local informal economy due to the thriving illegal alcohol industry there, and is also related to the consecutive junctures of violence between 4B and Bondeni. In fact, these two factors are intertwined, and laid the foundation for this binary to gain strength on the ground, as I will flesh out below.

---

This diversity is also reflected in language. Although Sheng was the dominant language in the street in most places in Mathare, older people with the same ethnic background often spoke their vernacular with each other. In a few areas in Mathare that are marked by less diversity, such as Kosovo Mwisho near the hospital, it was not uncommon to also hear young people converse with each other in their vernacular, albeit heavily laced with Sheng. Members of the Ruff Skwad gang, for instance, often talked with each other in the Kikuyu language, and I had to at times remind them to shift to Sheng so I could follow their conversations.
Historically, the alleged dominance of ethnic groups in specific areas in Mathare can be explained through migration patterns, as people often chose to settle near others from the same rural area (and, as such, with those with the same or a similar ethnic background – Dafe 2009). This is reflected in the names of certain neighbourhood areas in Bondeni where people who had migrated to the city from the same rural village lived together. For instance, a distillation site near the bridge was named after a rural village in Murang’a (a region in Central Province) where many residents of Shantit, which is adjacent to Bondeni, originally came from. In the following chapters, I will analyse how the growing conflation between ethnic identifications and localities within local imaginaries also intersected with identifications and categorisations of old and new settlers (cf. Nelson 2002). For now, it is enough to say that demographic records are either absent or unreliable, although people did increasingly construct certain villages as either Luo or Kikuyu, and many articulated and explained in these ethnic terms the animosities between particular neighbourhoods and putatively different social and economic groups of residents.

The construction of Kikuyu versus Luo ghetto villages became ever more salient during the 2007/8 post-election violence (cf. Okombo & Sana 2010). Current tensions between 4B and Bondeni (and also Shantit) have a long history, and to some extent were perpetuated by the high frequency of robberies and killings at the bridge. As noted, however, crime is just one aspect of the very complicated and tense relationships that exist between these two sides of the river. This is illustrated by the way Tyson, a young alcohol distiller who identified as Luo, legitimised his participation in the post-election violence. In January 2008, he told me that he and other perpetrators aimed to oust residents from Bondeni who they identified as Kikuyu. Tyson had grown up in 4B, and he had supported Raila Odinga during the 2007 general elections. Odinga, the presidential candidate of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and the main opponent of Mwai Kibaki, had a Luo background. Kibaki, meanwhile, had a Kikuyu background, and he was the incumbent presidential candidate of the Party of National Union (PNU – Kagwanja & Southall 2009:259-260). Tyson shared the following with me:

411!... (a slogan pronounced as ‘four, one, one!’ and which was used by ODM supporters to separate the Kikuyu label from the other ethnic labels and portray the Kikuyu as ‘enemies of the state’) It is us, 41 [ethnic groups], against one [ethnic group]. They are thieves and they have oppressed us too long. They had Kenyatta, and Kibaki... you see what happened! All the land, good land is theirs. When you look at Goldenberg (a well-known corruption scandal), it is Kikuyu, Anglo Leasing (also a well-known corruption scandal), also Kikuyu, they think it is their country but they can’t live with us, the other tribes. We can all live together but not with them. They are tribalists and now they stole the presidency. It’s Raila who should be president. Chungwa Moja,
Maisha Bora (‘One orange makes life cool’ in Kiswahili, which was the official campaign slogan for ODM). Now we select people who can enter Gaza (a part of Mahare was renamed ‘Gaza’ during the violence).

Tyson cast the Kikuyu group as ‘enemies of Kenya’ by invoking the unofficial, but widely used, ‘four-one-one’ slogan of the ODM. He and the other men I spoke to during the violence shared with me that they agreed with certain ODM politicians who propounded a drastic solution to what these politicians termed as the Kikuyu problem, namely ‘Lesotho’ (Waki Report 2008). Lesotho referred to the landlocked country of Lesotho, which is completely enclosed by South Africa. A few of the local ODM politicians who had organised rallies in the run-up to the 2007 elections designated Central Province in Kenya, commonly known as ‘Kikuyu land’, as a way to create this nation within a nation.

In the way Tyson described the Kikuyu label, he negotiated two intersecting dominant discourses on citizenship and belonging in Kenya⁸, positioning himself squarely with Luoism, a sub-dominant discourse on citizenship and belonging in Kenya. Tyson drew on the perceived marginalisation of the Luo group that is central to Luoism when he stated: “It is us, 41, against one. They are thieves and they have oppressed us too long. They had Kenyatta, and Kibaki...you see what happened!” The first dominant discourse on citizenship at play here was constructed by the Kenyatta government (1964-1978) and can be termed Kikuyuisation (Smith 1991). This discourse legitimised the centralisation of power by President Kenyatta, who had a Kikuyu background, and his elites, among whom a majority also had Kikuyu backgrounds. Simultaneously, it legitimised the attack on and marginalisation of opposition politicians (such as Oginga Odinga, who had a Luo background – Throup & Hornsby 1998). Kikuyuisation thus largely shaped the marginalisation experiences of the ‘Luo’ group, which is central to Luoism, and fuelled the salience of the Kikuyu-Luo binary in political discourse.⁹

The second dominant discourse at play in Tyson’s words was constructed by the Moi government (1978-2002) and was termed Majimboism¹⁰ (Anderson 2005b; 2006a).

---

⁸ The names of the political discourses described here (Luoism, Kikuyuisism, Kikuyuisation and Majimboism) are all terms that have wide currency in the political and public domains in Kenya.

⁹ The dominance of the Luo and Kikuyu labels in political discourse emanates from a complex history and stiff competition between politicians with these backgrounds from the colonial era onwards (see also Throup & Hornsby 1998:17-18). The Moi government stirred up these competitive sentiments to divide opposition forces. Most politicians with other ethnic backgrounds aligned themselves with one or the other side. These alliances were, however, never self-evident and shifted constantly. Furthermore, politicians with, for instance, Kikuyu backgrounds occasionally sided with parties who were widely taken as Luo because of the party leader (Raila Odinga), and vice versa. Nevertheless, the main opposing political blocks in the political arena in Kenya continue to be popularly imagined as Luo versus Kikuyu power bases today.

¹⁰ The term Majimboism refers to a political system of ethnic federalism that was developed by Moi and other ethnic minority opposition leaders from the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) during the last few years of the colonial era (Haugerud 1995:213; Ochieng 2001; Anderson 2005b). In the context of Majimboism, each ethnic group is entitled to ownership of its ‘traditional’ land, which is mostly fixed
Majimboism was never meant to be fully implemented during this period. However, it legitimised harsh political measures to both weaken powerful elites, mainly with Kikuyu backgrounds, and discredit the opposition of intellectuals, many of whom also had Kikuyu backgrounds, and all of whom objected to the dictatorial tendencies of the Moi government (Wanaina 2004; Wamwere 2003). Moi had a Kalenjin background, and Majimboism helped him and his elites to undermine the ethno-centric power structures put in place by the Kenyatta regime and instead build up their own. Moreover, Majimboism set in motion a propaganda machine that culminated in the violent eviction, and even the death, of squatters (many of whom had Kikuyu backgrounds) from the Rift Valley regions during the emergence of a multi-party system in the 1990s (Githongo 2002; Akiwumi 1999; Kagwanja & Southall 2009). These squatters in the Rift Valley were described as ‘foreigners’, and were considered to be opposition voters by the Moi government (Rutten & Owuor 2009:314; KNHRC 2001; Akiwumi Report 1999). Strikingly, the dominant construct of the Kikuyu label transformed in the period 1998-2007 from meaning foreigners in the Rift Valley to being cast as ‘non-Kenyans’ and even ‘enemies of Kenya’ (Kagwanja & Southall 2009:262; Chege 2008:133). The latter depiction is an extreme interpretation of Moi’s discourse on citizenship and belonging, and all of this shows how interwoven ethnicity and politics were in Kenya. Yet, this connection was never linear or self-evident, for politicians shifted sides constantly, regardless of the putative ethnic affiliations of the parties. This did not, however, withstand the popular imaginings of political parties in broad ethnic terms.

During the post-election violence that followed the 2007 general elections, Tyson and other young men drew on this extreme version of Majimboism, informed by the colonial government, and the resources associated with it (Anderson 2005a:563, 2005b; Kagwanja & Southall 2009:268).

11 It was not very difficult for the Moi government to target squatters with Kikuyu backgrounds in the Rift Valley, as these groups generally lived together in clusters. Moreover, people’s names, accents and appearances were generally taken as indicators of their ethnic belonging, and it was not uncommon to find road blocks in conflict zones that people could only pass after identifying themselves by showing their national identification cards and speaking in their vernacular (see also Wa Wamwere 2003; Githongo 2002).

12 Post-election tensions broke out into widespread violence in several poor rural and urban localities on 30 December 2007, which was the day that President Kibaki was inaugurated during a hurried swearing-in ceremony. In the Rift Valley and Coast Provinces, other ethnic groups such as the Kalenjin and the Kissi were also involved in violent conflicts, but that did not alter the leading perception in Kenya that this was about Luo and Kikuyu. In Mathare and many other ghetto areas in Nairobi (see also De Smedt 2009), the Mungiki and Taliban gangs clashed seemingly in support of the opposing political parties. The (mostly) men who took to the streets in Mathare after the inaugural ceremony on that fateful Sunday shouted slogans accusing all ‘Kikuyu’ of being Mungiki and PNU-supporters and, therefore, thieves. In their eyes, Kibaki had stolen the elections with the backing of the entire ‘Kikuyu community’. In the weeks that followed, many inhabitants with Kikuyu backgrounds were violently driven away, their houses occupied, their businesses and shops looted and burnt, and numerous women were raped. Many young rioters spontaneously joined the Taliban gangs, while groups of men with Kikuyu and other ethnic backgrounds retaliated and were accompanied by Mungiki gangs from ghetto villages in the surrounding neighbourhood. The violence quickly spiralled out of control and, within days, Bondeni, the ghetto village in Mathare Valley at issue here, was turned into a ghost town of smouldering ruins. Later reports provided evidence of the organised nature of the violence that took
by the unofficial ODM campaign slogans of four-one-one and Lesotho, to legitimise the violence they committed against Bondeni residents with allegedly Kikuyu backgrounds. Majimboism in its extreme version mostly targeted people with a Kikuyu background and as such provided Tyson with the language to grasp his own grievances with regard to his alcohol bosses, many of whom were women with Kikuyu backgrounds. As I will explore further in the following chapters, men like Tyson saw the dominant labels of the Kikuyu group depicting people with Kikuyu backgrounds as thieves and ethno-chauvinists, which was evidenced by the fact that many of their bosses had Kikuyu backgrounds. This is how political discourses gained strength on the ground in Mathare. These men explained the relative wealth of their bosses by referring to a common trope which stated that everyone with a Kikuyu background had benefitted during the Kenyatta era at the cost of the marginalisation of, above other ethnic groups, the Luo. Luosim propagated the belief that this marginalisation was perpetuated during the Moi and Kibaki era by the corruption of political elites with mainly Kikuyu backgrounds, as voiced by Tyson above. The focus in the following chapters is on why this trope gained currency among young men like Tyson above all of the other available tropes that would explain the differences in wealth between the different social groups in Mathare and which, for instance, refer to migration histories.

**On imagining rich Kikuyu and poor Luo**

There is enough historical evidence to suggest that the majority of people who lived in Bondeni during and in the first decades after the colonial era were women with a Kikuyu background (White 1990: 206; Nelson 2002, 1978; Ross 1973), many of whom later became the bosses of the alcohol gangs. Accordingly, these women had a head start in gaining access to resources and accumulating wealth compared to migrants who arrived in Mathare from the 1970s onwards. The mothers and grandmothers of a majority of my research participants in Bondeni were first generation sex workers who had arrived in Mathare right after Kenya’s independence in 1963. This included Shosho Kingi and Mama J’s grandmother. I visited the latter in the rural area in August 2010. She had moved there when she had become too old to earn a living through sex work. During our interviews, both of the grandmothers confirmed that the Kikuyu language had been the dominant language in Mathare, and especially in Bondeni, until the 1980s (Ross 1973). Moreover, some of these earlier female migrants, like Mama J’s grandmother, had been affiliated with the Mau Mau movement (Anderson 2005a; Elkins 2005) during the 1950s (see also Nelson 2002; White 1990). Many of them had been detained or had lost husbands and other relatives during the State of Emergency (Elkin 2005:35). Mama J’s grandmother did not disclose much about her personal experiences during this time. In general, these often highly traumatised women rarely talked about the atrocities they had place in these localities (Human Rights Watch 2008). The violence lasted about two months until the main opponents, Raila and Kibaki, signed a coalition-agreement on 28 February 2008 (BBC 2008).
experienced, but many derived a sense of pride by remembering the Mau Mau struggle and their role in it. Indeed, Mama J’s grandmother visibly changed her posture when she uttered the words Mau Mau, jutting her chin forward, with her wrinkled face taking on an even more resolute mien than normal. "Mau Mau was against the white people", Mama J translated, while her grandmother squeezed the skin on my arm with her arthritic fingers. "She has never talked about [the trauma], and she will never talk about it, not even to me", Mama J continued to translate the rapid flow of Kikuyu words.

The interviews with many older women with Kikuyu backgrounds in Mathare told me that they did not adhere to Kikuyisation, and negotiated this dominant discourse by constructing a sub-dominant discourse I term Kikuyism. Kenyatta’s ethnocentric and elitist approach not only galvanised tensions between the Kikuyu and other ethnic groups in Kenya, but also among different Kikuyu groups (Lonsdale 2008b:310). The main bone of contention between the elites and poor groups with Kikuyu backgrounds was the memory of the Mau Mau movement (Clough 2003:255). The Kenyatta administration systematically ignored the historical and social relevance of the Mau Mau movement, thereby avoiding the moral obligation to return the land that had been taken away from Mau Mau fighters and those who had been detained during the State of Emergency. In doing this, the Kenyatta administration ignored the plight of the poor with Kikuyu (and many other ethnic) backgrounds, many of whom had been affiliated with Mau Mau and wanted public acknowledgement and material restitution (Ogot 2003:34). Kikuyism remembered Mau Mau with pride, and imagined a dichotomy between poor and rich people with Kikuyu backgrounds. It thus became the discursive space that saw the emergence of the Mungiki movement, with a strong Kikuyu profile, during the 1990s, first in Rift Valley and later in Mathare (see below). By constructing this sense of pride, these women in Mathare, many of whom had Kikuyu backgrounds, also aimed to counterbalance subject positions (imposed by the colonial government during the

In brief, people with a Kikuyu background were among the first and largest groups of Africans to work on European farms in the Rift Valley Province (and also within the government apparatus). This was because of the proximity of the Kikuyu Native Reserves to both the capital Nairobi and the European farms. During the 1930s, many migrant workers lost their jobs to the mechanisation of farm work. They often could not return to their Native Reserves, because these had become overpopulated over time, and thus they ended up as squatters in the Rift Valley and the emerging ghettos of Nairobi, such as Mathare. Protests among these groups eventually led to the Mau Mau insurgence (see also Maleba 1993; Kanogo 1987; Turner & Brownhill 2001; Elkins 2005; Anderson 2005b; Clough 1998; Berman & Lonsdale 1992; and Odhiambo & Lonsdale 2003).

In popular use, the terms Kikuyisation and Kikuyism are often used interchangeably without a clear difference between the two concepts. In fact, the term Kikuyism is the most popular usage, and is often deployed to describe what I term Kikuyisation. Moreover, in scholarly use, the term Kikuyism frequently appears when describing political thinking and action against the elites with Kikuyu backgrounds, and is thus phrased as anti-Kikuyism (Lynch 2008, 2013; Mueller 2008). I propose to differentiate clearly between a government discourse instigated by the Kenyatta government and the elites who took on this project after Kenyatta’s death, which I term Kikuyisation, and a subdominant discourse constructed by poor groups with a Kikuyu background to conceptualise their marginalised positions within the contexts of Kikuyisation.
State of Emergency and perpetuated by Majimboism) that characterised them as sex workers, barbarians, criminals and ethnic chauvinists (Nelson 1987:4). Kikuyuism, with its strong reference to the Mau Mau movement, formed a basis for social interaction among these women in Mathare, who faced a new and unfamiliar situation in the urban slums. Shosho Kingi stated:

Many of us came from Kiambu, some from Nyeri, but mostly Kiambu and we shared a culture. We all spoke Kikuyu. Not like today... now our youth don’t even know Kikuyu and that is bad. This side, our side became strong together and we all know each other. Later Luo came on the other side of the river... but much later and at different times. They are not strong together. We were here first and we are like people from God, we love God.... our Christian God and we follow our culture. Mathare Valley is not our gishage ('ancestral land' or 'family land in the rural area' in the Kikuyu language) because this is not where we were to live from our God.

Shosho Kingi’s words here resonate with the popular discourse on migration in Mathare that regards first-comers as 'natives' (see more in Chapter 6), and this is how she articulated her claim to land in Bondeni and affirmed her status as an old settler. The dominant binary between the Kikuyu and Luo groups, which is central to Kikuyuisation, informed how older Bondeni women, in the context of tensions in their immediate environments, interpreted and articulated notions of entitlement. These tensions were first and foremost sparked by the loss of vegetable gardens in 4B to rural-urban migrants (many of whom had a Luo background) who began to settle there during the 1970s and 80s. This shows that Kikuyuism in Mathare, as imagined by people who had not benefited at all from the Kenyatta government, resonated with the anti-Luo political discourse of this government. The reason why women in Bondeni constructed 4B as exclusively Luo must largely be sought in the language and discourse available to them during the 1970s and 80s. Women in Bondeni appropriated the anti-Luo narrative in order to comprehend the growing tensions.

The intertextual reference to the alleged binary between Kiambu and Nyeri (Clough 1998:161) by Shosho Kingi is directly linked to the dominant narrative of Mau Mau in Kenya. This narrative depicts Nyeri as the 'true' base of the Mau Mau rebellion in the forests, whereas Kiambu became remembered as being a less active region in this fight. Some people even described Kiambu to me as a home to the majority of the 'homeguards', which is a popular name for elites with Kikuyu backgrounds who benefitted from collaborating with the colonial government. It is commonly held in Mathare that the homeguards took over the government after independence. The first president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, as well as the current president (his son Uhuru Kenyatta), both come from Kiambu. Interestingly, many elderly residents in Mathare took enormous pride in their affiliation with Mau Mau, regardless of their rural origins. From this perspective, the binary between Nyeri and Kiambu mentioned by Shosho probably did not refer to the alleged divides between 'Kikuyu' groups, but to migrants who lived together in a new place and who cherished their connections based on shared rural origins. This reading of her words is supported by the fact that most residents in Mathare, be they from Kiambu or Nyeri, were involved in the urban Mau Mau struggle.
between Bondeni and 4B. In return, from the 1980s onwards, residents in 4B drew on anti-Kikuyu narratives, which were central to Luoism and Majimboism, to give voice to their frustrations with regard to the growing chang’aa industry. This industry attracted a lot of police attention to the riverside, and also led to the destruction of the houses opposite the distillation sites in 4B (which was where many residents with Luo backgrounds lived), due to the residues released from the drums with considerable force. Kingi told me: “This grudge is old (between Bondeni and 4B), it raised us, we learn to continue this by our parents. [...] No, it is not ethnic ha ha no, but we make it ethnic. That is how politicians do it, so they can get support in that area or that one.”

The historical coincidence of the earlier urban arrival of many women with a Kikuyu background thus led to an economic divide between the inhabitants of Mathare that became increasingly constructed in ethnic terms. Their head-start in accruing and investing capital led to an economic divide between older settlers in Bondeni and the newer settlers in 4B. This led to a particular division of labour in and between these ghetto villages in Mathare. Many young men from Area 4B (like Tyson) became distillers in Bondeni, whereas wealthier people in Bondeni, many with Kikuyu backgrounds, controlled the process of distillation and selling in this location. These alcohol bosses also constituted the majority of landlords in Bondeni (and in other ghetto villages in Mathare), which led to the dominant perception that rich people in Mathare had Kikuyu backgrounds, while poor people had Luo backgrounds. Despite the presence of many poor residents with Kikuyu backgrounds and numerous wealthy residents (including alcohol bosses) with Luo (and other) backgrounds in Mathare, Majimboism acquired meaning to men like Tyson as a result of their own marginalised status as alcohol gang members. I will further explore the position of alcohol gang members and their relationships with bosses (bar owners and wholesalers) in the following chapters.

The rise of ethnic-based gangs in Mathare
The popular imaginings of ethnic ghetto villages and ethnic dimensions of socio-economic fault lines were deepened by the emergence of Mungiki gangs in Mathare (see Introduction). As mentioned above, the forged binary between putative Kikuyu and Luo ghetto villages in Mathare was already present prior to the arrival of Mungiki members. However, Kingi explained to me that the emergence during the late 1990s of local Mungiki gangs, which were local groups that were somehow linked to the national Mungiki movement, “made people more tribal so they take each other, like he is a Kikuyu, he is a Luo...that person he is a Kamba hahaha but he wants to be a Kikuyu hahaha.”

During the period of Mungiki control of Bondeni between 2001 and 2006, the gang leaders had often approached Kingi in an attempt to persuade him to become a member. Kingi always refused, and told me: "Yah, they often come and see me, say I am a good Kikuyu, I am really a Mungiki but not yet a member. I am good because I
don't drink ha ha. You know they can even force you. I was afraid, I just avoided them." Kingi feared the Mungiki from the moment the first groups arrived at public transport stations in Nairobi during the late 1990s. Like many of his friends, Kingi was surprised by the speed with which these groups first took control of the matatu routes on the main roads near ghetto areas like Mathare, and later of entire ghetto villages inside Mathare. His fear was derived from a deep sense of unease over the mono-ethnic profile and religious discipline (imposing strict rules such as avoiding alcohol and female circumcision) demonstrated by these gangs (cf. Wamue 2001, 2002). Kingi related: "Shosho [grandmother] she always tells me to speak Kikuyu. It is from our parents we learn this tribalism, but we grow up in ghetto, and we speak Sheng. We are ghetto, ha ha, ghetto first! It is not in me." Nevertheless, many of Kingi’s friends later joined the local Mungiki gang in Bondeni as it provided ample social and economic opportunities, especially for young men who identified as Kikuyu, despite their often multiple ethnic backgrounds. This specific ethnic identification began to determine access to opportunities provided by these gangs, and this triggered growing resentment among young men like Tyson, who felt increasingly excluded.

As described in the Introduction, the Mungiki movement was allegedly founded during the late 1980s to protect the squatter communities (mostly with Kikuyu backgrounds) during clashes in the Rift Valley Province that were instigated by the Moi government. The Mungiki movement allegedly had ties to politicians (mainly with Kikuyu backgrounds – Kagwanja 2005), and earned money through revenues from the many Mungiki gangs operating in Nairobi’s ghettos, along certain matatu routes, and later also in a few rural areas (cf. Henningsen & Jones 2013; Mutongi 2006:558; Wa Mungai & Samper 2006:60). During the early 2000s, both the national media and the Mungiki leadership estimated the membership of all Mungiki gangs to be a combined 1.5 million, which is an unlikely high number (Wamue 2001:454). However, even if exaggerated for reasons of sensationalism (in the case of the press) and propaganda (in the case of the Mungiki leadership), Mungiki gangs were a force to be reckoned with in local and national politics.

Interestingly, the Mungiki gangs were not such a unique phenomenon in Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos. Gangs of thieves, con artists and brokers of stolen goods have always been part of economic life in Mathare. Along with these gangs, KANU (the Kenya African National Union) youth wingers also shaped processes of gang formation in Mathare. Since independence in 1963, the dominant political party of KANU has deployed young men and women in ghettos like Mathare (and also in many poor rural areas). Their job in Mathare was to arrest and discipline petty thieves and alcohol distillers, sellers and customers, and to report cases of domestic violence and other neighbourhood disturbances to the local chief (see also Throup & Hornsby 1998; Hornsby 2012). Many KANU youth wingers were former gang members, and some continued to be gang members by night, blurring an already thin line between state authority and gangs in Mathare. In an attempt to reassert control over the matatu terminuses, which are spaces notorious for high gang activity, the
youth wingers received an additional mandate from the chiefs in Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos to discipline this industry (Mutongi 2006). The KANU youth wingers can thus be regarded as the first groups of youths to secure these bus stations, long before the Mungiki arrived (cf. Anderson 2002). These groups controlled *matatu* routes and exacted bribes and so-called security taxes from *makanga* (touts in Sheng). In this endeavour, their operations were very similar to those of the Mungiki gangs a decade later, as they also collaborated with both the administrative and council police, who all took a share of the takings (cf. Mutongi 2006: 555; Wa Mungai & Samper 2006: 60).

In contrast to the Mungiki gangs, however, the KANU youth wingers had multiple ethnic backgrounds, but there were other groups that arose before the Mungiki gangs that did have ethnic profiles. This was a result of the return of multi-party politics from 1991 onwards (Throup & Hornsby 1998), which opened up a political space that was marked by intense electoral competition. Local political figures from emerging oppositional political parties followed KANU’s example and also established youth wings (or armies, *majeshi* in Kiswahili, as they were popularly dubbed) in Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos. These armies had names such as *Taliban*, *Baghdad Boys* and *Jeshi la Embakasi* (Anderson 2002), and many, but not all, had members with ethnic backgrounds similar to that of the politician with whom they were affiliated. These groups assisted their *godfathers* (*‘Big Man’* in Sheng) in politics by mobilising crowds at rallies, disrupting the rallies of opponents, and using general intimidation tactics during elections. Accordingly, they established themselves as vigilantes in Nairobi ghetto areas for a fee (Gecaga 2007; Anderson 2002; Wa Mungai & Samper 2006).

I will return to these groups, and the Taliban gangs in particular, in the following chapters. For now, it must suffice to hypothesise that the Mungiki gangs in Mathare can, to some extent, be considered as part of this development; consequently, neither their ethnic profiles nor their vigilante activities were unique. The reason why the Mungiki gangs received a lot of attention from the media and academics alike concerned their ubiquity in Nairobi during the first decade of the new millennium. The Mungiki gang phenomenon in Mathare cannot, however, be considered in isolation from other gang phenomena inside these ghettos. In particular, highly local and multi-ethnic working gangs interacted intensively with Mungiki and other ethnic-based gangs in Mathare. Further insight into the group-making projects of working gangs in the following chapters will not only contribute to a greater understanding of the diversity of the processes of gang formation in Mathare (and in other Kenyan ghettos), but will also enable the reader to better grasp the mounting violence there since the late 1990s, which involved all of these different groups.
Conclusion

This chapter mapped out the key localities in Bondeni, which is my main research area in Mathare, such as the Manoki public toilet, the bridge connecting 4B and Bondeni and the One Touch distillation site. The tour I described spatialised this map, thus setting the stage for the tours narrated by my research participants in the following chapters. It also revealed the visible divide between Upper Bondeni and Lower Bondeni, and explained that this partly stemmed from the distinction between private and public land. Low-income families generally resided illegally on road and river reserves in Lower Bondeni, whereas the slightly wealthier families took up residence in the privately constructed stone flats that were dotted throughout Upper Bondeni. This social and economic divide laid the foundation for complicated power struggles between tenants, structure owners and landlords. These were exacerbated by multiple scams that were played out by several landlords and key shareholders of Bondeni Properties, thus hampering the development envisaged for this area and intensifying the concentration of resources in the hands of a few.

I also teased out the historical background to the matrifocal society that Bondeni became, and explained why the main source of income shifted from sex work and distilling busaa (practised until the early 1980s) to distilling chang’aa from the early 1980s onwards. The rapid expansion of the chang’aa industry (locally dubbed ‘chang’aa breweries’) led to a further accentuation of existing social and economic fault lines and tensions between both different ghetto villages and putative social groups. Ethnicity became increasingly implicated in people’s imaginings of these divisions during the 1990s and 2000s, even to the extent that these fuelled consecutive junctures of violence. In this period, the popular notions of ethnic ghetto villages and ethnic dimensions with relation to socio-economic divides were further strengthened by the emergence of ethnic-based gangs in Mathare, such as the Mungiki. Contrary to dominant perceptions, these latter groups were not unique, as KANU youth wingers and majeshi had provided young ghetto residents with social and economic opportunities prior to Mungiki control, while the majeshi groups also often had ethnic profiles, with the Taliban gangs being an example. The Mungiki gangs were, however, somewhat exceptional in that they displayed extraordinary political and economic power and enjoyed extended spaces of influence.

During the first half of the 1990s, before the arrival of Mungiki gangs but amidst the rise of the allegedly mono-ethnic majeshi, Kingi founded the first multi-ethnic and highly local working gang in Bondeni. Soon, many of the young men in this ghetto village joined this and other newly-established alcohol gangs. In the next chapter, I delve deeper into the emergence of these particular working gangs and look at how these groups were tied to processes of becoming men.

Introduction
There is very little research conducted in Kenya on processes of gang formation in relation to notions of work. As already discussed, the predominant focus in the media and academia on ethnic-based gangs and political violence in Kenya reified ethnic identifications as a key motivator for young men to join gangs, along with their allegedly inherent inclination to engage in violence (see also Were 2008). In this chapter, I set out to explore the history of a specific type of working gang: the alcohol gang. In particular, I look into why mostly young men choose to join alcohol gangs, who can become a member, and at what point in their life trajectories these young men decide to join such a group.

In an attempt to move beyond the prevalent image of ethnicity as the dominant marker in processes of gang formation in Nairobi ghettos such as Mathare, I discuss popular notions of work and respectability, exploring why and how these ideas deviate from dominant notions of legality and morality. This sets the stage for comprehending why becoming an alcohol gang member was so popular among young men in Mathare during the 1990s. I then describe why and how a small group of young men came to found the first such gang in 1994, before explaining why these groups were such a recent phenomenon compared to other gangs, vigilante groups and kamjeshi (‘youths who secure bus stations and lure in passengers’ in Sheng). Processes of group formation among alcohol gang members were not only based on notions of work, but also hinged on popular ideas of masculinity. The space of the gang played a pivotal role in the processes of becoming men and enacting shifting and context-bound notions of manhood. I thus explore gangs as age-sets, and describe the relationship between the gang and the moments in a man’s life that mark the transition from boy to ‘junior man’ and, eventually, ‘senior man.’ This will help when it comes to understanding why working gangs are important groups to join, but also to leave, as part of individual social navigation trajectories. This is also a first step in contextualising ethnic identifications among these young men.

Respectable ‘illegality’
Before further exploring the formation processes of working gangs, it is important to first take into account popular distinctions between work and crime. This will shed light on why the young men I worked with referred to their illegal income-generating activities as work.

A few days after Christmas in 2010, I took Brayo, his wife and two children to a small Eritrean restaurant in Eastleigh where I bought them Enjera Zigni, a popular Eritrean dish, before walking back to their house in Kambi, Bondeni, through the hubbub of Juja Road (see Map 5), to enjoy the food. They had just returned from celebrating Christmas in Subukia in the Rift Valley, where Brayo’s aunt lived. After we shared this festive lunch together we relaxed in their one-room apartment in a stone tenement building in Bondeni, and our conversation
moved on to rising food prices and the impact this had had on the *chang’aa* business (illegal alcohol). It had been an exceptionally slow season, particularly as December was usually a time when *chang’aa* sellers like Brayo doubled their income. "People are really struggling, ha ha you know how you will know? So many *wagondi* ('thieves' in Sheng) around. Every day you hear so and so was mugged, or someone was stabbed there, at the bridge (see Map 5), killed there and there." Brayo gestured animatedly, a telling sign that he was angry. "Crime is up, young *wagondi*, eeehhh, what they do is bad. He (by which he meant a man in general) worked for that phone, how would you feel? And they carry knives, they just kill you, they don’t care!" According to Brayo, stealing, with or without the use of arms, was a crime regardless of why, where and how it took place or who was involved. In contrast, he did not perceive distilling *chang’aa* and selling drugs or stolen goods as criminal activities. Most of the young men I worked with had fewer qualms about stealing outside Mathare than Brayo, but they too vigorously denounced theft inside Mathare, even if they were still involved in such practices. Likewise, they all seemed to follow Brayo’s framing of distilling *chang’aa* and selling drugs and stolen goods as 'work.'

Taking alleged criminal activity as work is not uncommon in so-called illegal economies, and participants often evince the same motivations as workers in the so-called legal economy (Sassen 2007:98). Previous research has shown that, upon close scrutiny, purported contrasts between legal and illegal economies are problematic at best (Wacquant 2002, Bourgois 1995; Fagan & Freeman 1999). Contrary to common perception, economic activities that are generally considered to be illegal may in fact make a sizeable contribution to recognised economies (Sassen 2007), and uncoupling one from the other seems to be impossible. Yet such notions of legality and illegality stubbornly prevail in dominant discourses in Kenya and elsewhere. However, the prevailing notions on what is legal in Kenya did not coincide with local perceptions of licit and illicit practices (see also Roitman 2006:249) in Mathare. Indeed, as illustrated by Brayo’s words, a number of practices that were deemed illegal by the dominant discourse and regulated by law were considered to be rational, reasonable and even respectable behaviour by many in the Mathare ghetto. Licit practices, in this regard, were what people locally took as normal, legitimate and respectable ways to generate income. Accordingly, the popular discourse on respectability maintained a clear dichotomy between work (long-term income-generating activities) and hustling (short-term income-generating activities) on the one hand and crime (stealing inside the ghetto) on the other. Distilling *chang’aa* was widely considered to be a respectable way to earn a living for young men in Bondeni Village, and this was underscored by the way many gang members used the term work to refer to these activities (cf. Thieme 2013).

It is telling that Kingi, Brayo and others never referred to legality and the law when reflecting on respectable behaviour and licit activities in the context of Mathare; they instead used words such as 'good' and 'respectable.' In contrast, they did use the term crime to describe the practices that they deemed illicit. The dominant distinction between legal and illegal practices upheld by the law thus lost much of its purchase in the everyday experiences of most people in Mathare as a result of their daily interactions with law enforcers. They emphasised to me that the police not only shot robbery suspects on sight, but also took bribes...
from gangs and were therefore heavily involved in all of the illegal practices in the ghetto. With little faith in the law and law enforcing institutions, the people in Mathare constructed their own socio-cultural scripts that shaped local moral conduct. In doing so, they drew on dominant discourses on morality, but reimagined these to fit their local experiences.

Kingi explained to me that there were three important factors at play in popular conceptualisations of licit or respectable and illicit or criminal practices. He underpinned the difference between these practices by constantly opposing distilling alcohol as work with stealing (inside the ghetto) as a crime. Firstly, Kingi expounded that many people judged these practices primarily by the way they impacted on them. Young wagondi who robbed people on their way to work at the bridge inside the ghetto were regarded as harmful to the social and economic development of local residents. As a consequence, their income-generating activities were considered to be highly illicit and, thus, criminal. In contrast, distilling alcohol benefitted the local economy, as most of the families in Bondeni Village relied for their survival on businesses that were directly linked to this industry. Secondly, the wagondi risked a bullet from the police or mob justice at the hands of passers-by. In contrast, distilling chang’aa involved fewer risks. Thirdly, there were not many other options for young men in Mathare besides joining working or wagondi gangs (see also Odhiambo & Manda 2003). Members of alcohol gangs, however, had access to a more steady cash flow than wagondi gang members, since they generally worked several days a week. On the other hand, the proceeds of theft were highly erratic and so made it difficult to plan household spending. Accordingly, working groups such as alcohol gangs enabled these men to take care of family members in ways that earned respect among fellow community residents.

The impact of the legalisation of chang’aa
The circumstances discussed above beg the question of how the legalisation of chang’aa in 20101 influenced local notions of licit and illicit practices and the way these working gangs were perceived. Kingi and Brayo discussed the legalisation and its consequences in Mathare while sitting outside the latter’s bar in January 2011. They both feared that the legislation would lead to a drop in the available work at the riverside. The anticipated plunge would thus diminish the space young men had to access income-generating activities, and this, they expected, would directly translate into an upsurge of petty theft inside the ghetto. Chang’aa was legalised in September 2010 (BBC 2010), yet its production by the riverside was still deemed to be highly illegal by law, since the bar owners and distillers continued to distil without a licence and without following set guidelines on hygiene and safety. Accordingly, little changed after the legalisation of chang’aa from the perspective of the bar owners and distillers in Bondeni, while the police continued to exact bribes at the sites. Smuggling, however, became increasingly dangerous, as the police were ordered to arrest anyone

---

1 The Kenyan government legalised chang’aa to improve state supervision and reduce the number of deaths among consumers. These deaths were the result of the chemical substances added to this drink to boost its kick, such as jet fuel, battery acid, embalming fluid and ARVs (Ngoiri & Mutambo 2012). A popular name for chang’aa in Kenya is ‘kill me quick’ (BBC 2010).
carrying illegal alcohol outside the ghetto. This had a drastic impact on local income and, hence, the availability of work for gang members.

Kingi was also worried about something else: "I think the police will organise a raid soon, they will pour chang’aa, just to show they do their job." From the time when the 'Mututho Law' (as the legislation that legalised chang’aa was popularly known) was passed in parliament, many of those in Mathare prepared for the worst; decades of police harassment had informed the general apprehension with which most people in the ghetto anticipated the implementation of the new law. Along with daily bribes and arrests, the police were known to periodically organise raids, which were often sparked by a public outcry following spectacular media coverage of the illegal 'chang’aa distilleries' in Bondeni. Oblivious to the repercussions for local residents, journalists occasionally infiltrated the Mathare riverside in order to conjure up a sensational story for a national daily or a news show (e.g. Kamau 2014). These publications generally caused a fleeting but emotionally charged debate on Internet forums on the continued existence of the illegal distilling sites. This then prompted the police to act to show the public they were living up to their mandate and they were crushing criminal enterprises. During these raids, the police, often in the company of TV cameras, demonstratively poured away chang’aa, arrested distillers, bar owners and customers en masse, and destroyed distilling equipment (NTV Kenya 2013). The same policemen, however, always returned the next day to demand their daily bribes at the distilling sites. Kingi’s fear that a raid was pending thus emanated from an accumulation of such experiences. Although the ghetto had been rife with speculation since the start of September 2010 when the law was passed in parliament, it took well over two years before a raid actually took place. This raid was probably propelled by the desire of the new government (which took office in 2013) to show its purpose. Nevertheless, the illegal alcohol industry is still active today in Mathare and many other ghettos, and Bondeni residents continue to pride themselves on being the chang’aa headquarters in Nairobi.

At first, I did not understand the widespread apprehension about the new law, because I, naively, thought the legalisation of chang’aa would be an opportunity for Mathare residents to expand their businesses without daily police harassment. Brayo laughed when I shared my hopes with him and Kingi, and shook his head in disbelief at my optimism.

No, this law, it will not help us down in mtaa ('ghetto' in Sheng). It’s a problem 'cause we don’t have the money to get a licence, and the equipment to brew ha ha like in a factory. Big Fish ('wealthy business people and politicians' in Sheng) can do that, it will give us more competition, and we will suffer more. Police can ask for more bribes because now they can say ‘it is legal, you don't have to brew like this.’

Kingi reflected on why large-scale, fully licensed chang’aa businesses had probably not yet seen daylight. "Customers are used to kumi ('ten' in Kiswahili), ha ha they cannot pay more than ashu ('ten' in Sheng). You can’t make a business, a legal one, and sell at that price." Ever since the colonial era, chang’aa as a type of moonshine has been associated with poverty, sex
work and crime. Its customer base has long been mostly inside ghetto neighbourhoods or poverty-stricken villages in rural areas (see also Lo et al. 2013; Izugbara et al. 2013). The reputation of chang’aa in popular imaginings would probably prevent affluent customers from buying the distill, even if it was bottled, (re-)branded and sold in uptown bars and restaurants. Without a potential uptown market, the ghettos and other poor regions in Kenya thus remained the main customer bases for the chang’aa industry. Too much was at stake to risk losing these markets by raising the price, which, as Kingi stated, would be inevitable if bar owners inside Mathare started adhering to the new regulations.

The daily profits earned by alcohol bosses described in the previous chapter provide a good indication of the amount of money circulating within the chang’aa industry and what was therefore at stake. A boss (sonko in Sheng) earning around or more than 100 Euros a day was called a Big Fish in Mathare Sheng. I asked Brayo how many Big Fish were operating in Mathare: “Ha ha ha...many Big Fish in the Mathare River, ha ha ha. At One Touch (the distilling site of this gang) there are now five, but Kiharu or Shantit, it can be 10 or even more.” I also asked him if he was considered to be a sonko, because he was a bar owner, and Kingi almost choked from laughing. Embarrassed by my question, Brayo told me he was ‘a small boss’ (a ka sonko in Sheng), by which he meant that even though he was a bar owner, he was in almost, but not entirely, the same social position as the distillers at the riverside. This is why the other gang members considered him to be part of their group. A few of the other One Touch members, such as Motion and Mato, also sold chang’aa at a bar they rented in Mathare, and were thus regarded as bar owners like Brayo. They were not, however, considered to be small bosses, as they distilled for themselves because, unlike Brayo, they could not afford to hire a fellow gang member to do it for them. As a consequence, they were still regarded by the other gang members as being in a similar position to them.

Apart from the five Big Fish mentioned by Brayo, around 50 further small-time bar owners from Manoki were affiliated to the One Touch distilling site during my fieldwork in 2010. On the whole, at the time, close to 50 Big Fish and a few hundred small-time bar owners and distillers (gang members) were engaged in the chang’aa industry in Bondeni Village and Shantit out of an area with close to 30,000 residents (see also MuST 2012). It is overwhelming to attempt to determine the money that this illegal industry generated every day in Bondeni alone, and how many local families depended on it. Nevertheless, the bulk of these daily revenues found their way to the Big Fish and their associates high up in the Nairobi police force and within the local administration. Indeed, in return for a percentage of the profits, and ever since the prohibition of chang’aa and other illegal drinks such as busaa in 1983, highly placed officials have turned a blind eye to the operations of the illegal distilling sites in Bondeni (Nelson 1987). Brayo commented: “Police still come but nothing has changed (since the law). Hongo (‘bribe’ in Sheng) is still the same. Police don’t want things to change in Bondeni. They eat, so why change?” All over Nairobi and elsewhere, the bars that did not observe the stringent opening hours and adhere to the other new rules stipulated by the Mututho Law were fined, and some had even been forced to close down (e.g. Gitonga 2013; KTN Kenya 2013). Curiously, the bars and distilling sites in Bondeni Village were left untouched, even though they were clearly not operating according to the new legislation.
Brayo stated: "In Mlango, or Kosovo (other ghetto villages in Mathare) they close bars, ha ha the police get &#39;hongo for video halls and other businesses, but here ha ha we only have bars and alcohol, so they can't close if they want to eat." Brayo did not even believe that there would be raids as a result of the new law, as this would seriously harm the flow of money to senior police officers and other highly placed government officials profiting from the industry.

**Growing up with chang'aa**

The information above provides a background as to why most alcohol gang members referred to their income-generating activities as work. Alcohol gangs are a quite recent phenomenon in Bondeni, and only emerged during the 1990s. As noted earlier, before that decade, women (and also a few men) mostly distilled the illegal beverage themselves and sold the finished product from their own homes (see also White 1990). To understand this shift in the division of labour during the early 1990s, I will now take a closer look at the life history of one of the founders of the first alcohol gang, the One Touch in Manoki, Bondeni.

It was a hot and dusty afternoon in November 2010. We were drinking tea at the hotelli ('a small roadside restaurant' in Kiswahili) owned by Kingi and his wife after finishing a lunch that had been organised by One Touch gang members. Monga, Kingi and I were talking about the lunch when Kingi suddenly became serious. His usual smile faded into a set expression and his eyes widened. "I think back a lot on the time, when I left the youth group. I was so ashamed when you saw me down." I asked him why he had felt ashamed. He explained that he had been afraid I would have been disappointed in him, which of course had not been the case as I had well understood his need to earn money as a young father. Kingi referred to the time when I returned to Kenya in 1998 after four years of absence. He had left the Safi youth group (see Chapter 1) in November 1997 in order to distil chang'aa down by the river in Bondeni seven days a week to provide for his young wife and newly born son. At the time of our talk in 2010, we had just started a counselling project with the One Touch gang, and this caused him to ponder his own history with this group, which he had founded in 1994 and left in 2007.

Kingi stressed: "Chang'aa is all we know, we grew up with it. But we know how people look at us." He refilled his cup with steaming hot, sweet and milky tea and continued to describe to me how he had often faced adverse reactions as soon as people from outside Mathare discovered he was from the ghetto. Even today, he sometimes notices people tucking away their mobile phones when they, as he put it, “found him out.” Based on these experiences, he always tried to hide from outsiders that he had once been involved in distilling illegal alcohol. He did not believe that people from outside the ghetto could understand his past. Like Monga and many other young men from Bondeni who participated in my research, Kingi grew up helping female relatives with distilling, smuggling and selling chang'aa. When he was a student in lower primary school, he often stayed the weekends in Mathare and helped his grandmother by supervising the distilling process of the strong alcohol ("spying" as he dubbed it). He was also often asked to smuggle the illegal drink to Kangemi dressed inconspicuously as a child in a school uniform. Kangemi is a rural ghetto on the western outskirts of Nairobi where his mother used to make a living selling chang'aa from her house. At the time, Kingi was still considered to be too young to distil himself, as the heavy
steel drums used in the process had to be contained on an open fire, which was a too hot and heavy a job for a nine-year-old. A few years later, he started distilling for his grandmother on his own to save her the money that had been used to hire other men.

**Going back to chang'aa**

In 1990, a year before I met Kingi, he dropped out of school after years of interrupted attendances due to a perpetual lack of funds to pay the school’s fees. As a school dropout, he began working for his grandmother as a 'driver'\(^2\) (the person handling the big steel drums), and so became responsible for the entire distilling process. He nevertheless continued to be active in the Safi youth group at the weekends, but spent most of his weekdays down by the river in the company of older men and women.

Those days it was still older women who brew, now it is mostly younger people, young men, I don’t think you remember, near Kinatiko. I helped *Shosho* to spy when someone helped her cooking. Then I became a driver so I cooked for her. She was getting older, ha ha ha, you can’t imagine, this hard work and all those women and ha ha ha some they had their husbands. I remember these women carrying *kango* (the 'distilling-mixture' in Sheng – Chapter 1) and working with their husbands to cook. They were married, mature people... *Shosho* paid a lot of money to the distillers so I decided to help bringing the *kango*...and cook, I was very happy...can you imagine I was Victa’s age (his 13-year old son).

At the *hotelli*, Monga had long since finished his tea and stood up from the wooden bench, vaguely mentioning that he had an appointment of sorts and had to leave us. As he was familiar with my way of talking to people, I guessed he sensed I wanted to go deeper into the conversation with Kingi. We were therefore left alone in the now deserted *hotelli*. There was the usual lull after lunch and before teatime, and Kingi’s very pregnant wife had left to take a rest at their house; at times, she needed to escape the heat that slowly built up underneath the iron sheet roof of the small restaurant each afternoon. This gave us a rare moment of privacy to continue our talk.

Kingi shared with me that he had been happy to distil full-time for *Shosho* in 1991, because he was now starting to earn his own money and was proud to be the youngest driver at the distilling site. Yet, he also dreamed of a different life. "*Shosho* had some money and send me to this friend who had a garage in Ngara (an industrious neighbourhood known for informal businesses near the city centre). I learned *Jua Kali*\(^3\) there, but I had to go back to

\(^2\)A 'driver' in Sheng indicates a person who is in control of the distilling process and who operates the drum. This, and other terms deployed to refer to roles and stages in the distilling process, is largely derived from the *matatu* idiom.

\(^3\)With the term *jua kali* ('hot sun' in Kikiswahili), people in Kenya are referring to informal businesses (other than food stalls and roadside restaurants) that are operated in the open air along the roadside. It mostly refers to garages and car-washes, but can also denote woodwork workshops (mostly furniture) and repair and maintenance workshops for electrical equipment.
ch'ang'aa because there was no money. Also, the garage was demolished by the city council (because it had been illegal).” Kingi twisted his hands in frustration while reflecting on missed opportunities and unmet desires. He had not resented distilling ch'ang'aa full-time, he said, but he had envisaged a different future for himself.

I know I am good at a lot of things. I stopped school, no pesa (money in Kiswahili), Jua Kali, no pesa. I went back from Ngara to cook (distil) full-time in...it was 1994. I still was part of the youth and go to camps, ha ha you were there, but I also worked down (near the river).

**The first alcohol gang: independence and innovation**

Kingi continued: "And it was me and the other young guys at Kinatiko, we started the One Touch gang, we are a gang, we do things youth want to do, we gamble, ha ha ha."

Before the 1990s, Kinatiko was simply called *rowe*, which means ‘near the river’ in the Kikuyu language. Most of the distilling was done by women who mixed their own *kango* ('distilling mixture' in Sheng) and had their own bars. As described in Chapter 1 and mentioned above by Kingi, some of these women were married while others worked as sex workers from their home bars. These women (and some men) were increasingly assisted by younger, mostly male, relatives as they got older, because it became ever more difficult to do the work themselves. Kingi told me that it had not taken long before tensions emerged, given that these young male relatives felt underpaid but undertook the most dangerous part of the work. Kingi and the other young men thus began to demand a pay rise. To underline their demands, in 1994 they moved their drums to a new distilling site further down the river. This forced their bosses, often mothers, grandmothers, aunties and uncles, to hire them at a site that was, to a large extent, under their control. Instead of distilling, these bosses increasingly began to concentrate on selling ch'ang'aa. The young gang members, however, still felt underpaid, and Kingi told me that they soon developed an elaborate, but highly dangerous, scheme of peddling stolen ch'ang'aa to supplement their daily wages. During my fieldwork in 2010-2011, distillers earned around 300 Kenyan Shillings (approximately 3 Euros) a day and worked for around three days a week. Selling stolen ch'ang'aa, termed 'piracy' in Sheng⁴, could potentially add 1,000 Kenyan Shillings (about 10 Euros) to that sum, more than doubling their weekly income. It is not difficult to imagine that when this was discovered, the bar owners struck back with a vengeance. Nonetheless, they have never been able to completely quell piracy, which still continues to this day.

The One Touch gang was not the first working gang operating in Mathare; others consisted of groups of mostly young men who worked in the *matatu* industry as conductors, or groups that were involved in selling drugs and stolen goods. The One Touch gang, however, was the first of its kind to be predominantly engaged in distilling ch'ang'aa. These men had complicated and tense relationships with their bosses, as well as with the policemen who came to the site to collect a daily bribe for each drum on display. The distillers were given

---

⁴The word ‘piracy’ in Sheng was inspired by news on piracy at the coast of Somalia.
money by their bosses to pay the mandatory bribes, but often asked the police to ‘leave one’ for them. This denoted that the young men wanted to share the bribe designated for a particular drum to divide among themselves without their bosses knowing about it. The phrase leave one was very popular among these young men, and underscored the relationship between them and their bosses and other authorities. Indeed, it marked their subtle defiance of the oppressive powers of the bosses, police and village elders. These young men were highly skilled in navigating these volatile relationships, and were sometimes able to tweak certain circumstances to their own advantage and enact agency. Piracy was one such practice of resistance, and making a deal with the police to keep part of a bribe was another. Often, such manoeuvres backfired majorly, but defeat never stopped these men from trying again to claim power in relation to the highly restrictive structures within which they were positioned.

Far removed from the critical gaze of bosses, other family members and village elders, the One Touch distilling site slowly developed into a hangout where One Touch gang members distilled and drank chang’aa, gambled, brokered stolen goods and organised other income-generating activities together. Kingi smiled at the memory.

All of us down there, our own baze (‘a hang out’ and ‘group of friends’ in Sheng), ha ha ha. That time, there was a different style, we did not use mitungi (‘jerry cans’ in Kiswahili), but ndebe (‘metal buckets’ in Kiswahili). You take more trips [carrying the distilling mixture to the site]. We also did not use coils, but we built three stones, like a jiko (‘a kitchen fire’ in Kiswahili). Then we had a fire and a [long] tube to cool with a big tin. And we used clothes to close the drum. One day we went to Thika for a funeral and we saw they used coils so we came back with the idea because it is easier to cool because the tube is so long and it get holes. We also started to use the ‘one touch’ (a turning handle made from iron) instead of clothes, it is less dangerous. Although it is still very dangerous because it is very hot and the bomb (‘the loud discharge of residue left in the drum after completing the distilling process’ in Sheng) explodes as soon as you open it. That is why we call it ‘one touch’. We put the chang’aa in ndebe in water [in the river] to cool, the water [from the river] was not black but brown, it was not so dirty. The sewer problem became much worse for the last 10 years.

Kingi here illustrated that funerals in the rural area were often taken as events that enabled Mathare residents to venture outside the ghetto, meet different people and get new ideas. In fact, he used the word “holiday”, and told me he often enjoyed going to the funerals of people he did not know very well (otherwise it was too painful, he said), as this enabled him to explore new places in Kenya. Kingi and two fellow One Touch founders had taken back new ideas from this particular funeral to improve their own distilling process in Mathare. Using our empty, chipped, enamel tea cups, Kingi demonstrated to me how these perfections upgraded production, stating that this had markedly boosted the distilling status of One Touch with regard to Kinatiko (the distilling site where some older people still worked). Soon,
the One Touch gang had an average of 15 drums lined-up on the riverside spewing out smoke and **bombs** every 45 minutes.

Kingi's initiative to move to an independent distilling site had been exceptionally timely and successful, as it coincided with a growing demand for **chang'aa** in the sprawling ghettos of Nairobi. Gradually, older women and men moved away from Kinatiko, the old distilling site, and began to specialise in selling and smuggling, whereas distilling became increasingly monopolised by different emerging alcohol gangs of young men who followed the example of the One Touch group. At the close of the 1990s, Bondeni had a total of five distilling sites and associated gangs of young, male distillers. From the bridge that connected Bondeni and 4B (see Map 5), it was possible to view the impressive size of what was now commonly known as the '**chang'aa** breweries', which were a long line of black drums stretching out alongside Mathare's river banks, clouding the river in permanent smoke (personal observation, August 1998).

Suddenly, Kingi's eight-year-old daughter rushed in with her cousin looking for tea and a **chapati** (a type of Indian bread that is very popular in Kenya). Kingi hugged his child affectionately and ended our conversation by saying: "Ha ha ha, you know what? Without One Touch, I would have become a thief and would have probably died before even becoming a father."

**Between options and risks**
The rise of multiple alcohol gangs was bolstered by rapid urbanisation during the late 1980s and early 1990s (see also Rakodi 1997), as this increased the demand for **chang'aa** in the sprawling ghettos where most rural-urban migrants ended up; the only drink they could afford was the ten Kenyan Shillings concoction. Other factors were also at play. Paramount was the appeal of **chang'aa** gangs to many young **wagondi**, because distilling was safer than robbing people and the work promised a steadier income.

Kingi had often told me that prior to the founding of the One Touch gang most of his friends had been thieves, and that many of them (he named 23 during our discussion) had now been shot dead by the police. Indeed, just a few weeks before our talk in his **hotelli** about the One Touch gang, Kingi's cousin Kuch had been tortured and shot dead by police officers. He had been killed during the night of 23 October 2010, ostensibly after being suspected of a robbery in Ngara, Nairobi. He had been in the company of a friend who had narrowly escaped the sudden spray of police bullets, and who had witnessed from afar how Kuch had succumbed to the gunfire and had even been slashed at with machetes before going limp. Kuch's mutilated body had eventually been discarded in City Park, allegedly by the police officers who had killed him. Other officers had found his body early on a Sunday morning. Upon receiving the dreadful news from Kuch's friend, his mother and aunt (Kingi’s sister) had hurried to the local police station where they were told to try the different mortuaries in Nairobi to locate the body. After checking several facilities, they eventually discovered the body at the City Mortuary underneath a heap of anonymous corpses in various stages of decomposition. The horror of his cousin's death and the way his female relatives had found his body provoked immense anger in Kingi.
On Sunday 31 October 2010, a week after Kuch's death, Kingi and I were walking towards his aunt's house in Kayole (a poor neighbourhood in Eastlands, Nairobi) to attend a meeting organised to raise funds for the funeral. Before entering the matanga (‘a funeral fund raising meeting' in Kiswahili), Kingi suddenly took my arm, pulled me aside and said in a strained voice: "I can't do anything today, I will be all right tomorrow. I first have to settle my mind, but now it disturbs me, my head is so full." A faint smile appeared on his grief-stricken face, but his jaw tightened, trying to hold back his emotions in an attempt to compose himself before facing his family inside the one-room house. As one of the few men of his age-group still alive in his family, he shared with me that he wanted to "be strong and focused". Some of his uncles and cousins had died from alcohol abuse, AIDS-related illnesses or police bullets, and he expressed the need to be a “leader” in his family.

They look up to me. Most of my family is women, some men died, some men, they went away. I need to show them we can arrange this funeral. Okay, he was a thief, not an innocent...but they (police) don't have to shoot you. Why not go to court? In mtaa (‘ghetto’ in Sheng) you can only become a thief or a distiller, or both. Me, when I was young, I admired thieves, thieves had too much pesa (‘money' in Kiswahili), I looked up to them, I wanted their money, but Shosho scared me. Saying so and so is in jail, so and so died. That scared me. I did not have friends who thought not to steal...they steal mostly in Mathare, they are from a different category who steal inside than thugs who steal outside mtaa. Like Kuch. Shosho gave me a job, and that made me not to steal, also her advice, she helped me a lot.

Following a staggering increase in violent crime and gang clashes, the Kenyan government officially issued a 'shoot to kill' policy to bring down the incidences of violent robbery and quell the powerful political gangs that were outlawed by the state in March 2002 (Anderson 2002). Such extra-judicial killings (Alston 2009) in Nairobi’s ghettos had been relatively commonplace before this date; reports had already referred to an upwards trend in the number of this type of killing of young, urban and poor men by the police in the 1990s, with as many as four to five deaths a week in 1998 (Kiai 2011). Yet these state-sanctioned murders escalated dramatically after the formal announcement in 2002. Indeed, the Kenyan police force, under the pretext of ‘gangsterism’, are reported to have killed over 8000 young and poor men in both Nairobi’s ghettos and certain rural areas between 2002 and 2008 (Oscar Foundation 2008). After 2008, the number of killings went down, but continued nonetheless.5

5 Although a few civil society organisations increasingly highlighted these killings (KNCHR 2008a, 2009; Oscar Foundation 2008; Kiai 2011), there was no widespread public outcry. Conversely, the police response to the post-election violence of 2007/2008 has been heavily scrutinised by national and international civil society organisations (KNCHR 2008b; Waki 2008), as well as by the wider public. Accordingly, the latter wave of criticism did spark structural police reforms that are currently underway in Kenya, even if reluctantly. According to many Mathare residents, the widespread reproach of the police brutality during the post-election violence set in motion changes that, for instance, ended the existence of notorious execution grounds. What's more, many ghetto residents pointed to the promulgation of the new constitution on 27 August 2010 (BBC 2010), and especially its new Bill of Rights, to further explain the reduction in these unlawful killings. However, these
However, due to a lack of proper data, it is virtually impossible to present an accurate figure of the total number of young, urban and poor men killed by the police since the late 1990s. Nevertheless, an informed but careful guess would locate the figure far above the stipulated 8000. To provide an indication of the continuing abuse of human rights by law enforcers in recent times, all of the families in Mathare that I have met and worked with over the past 16 years have lost a son, a brother, a father, a husband, a cousin or an uncle to a police bullet. Some of these young men were innocent, while others were known thieves, but all were deprived of a trial the moment they were shot dead by police officers.

In this vein, the founding of One Touch in 1994 can be regarded as a watershed moment in the lives of the young men in Mathare on multiple levels; it was safer than stealing, and their work was part of a larger industry that involved most of the people in Bondeni. Their socio-economic position in the community gradually became stronger as a result of this marked shift in the division of labour within the *chang’aa* industry. This transition was accompanied by relatively little tension, as the demand for *chang’aa* rocketed and there seemed to be plenty of opportunities for all. However, membership of these gangs was not open to just anyone.

**Belonging to a baze and gang membership**

A few days before Christmas in 2010, I sat outside Brayo’s bar on a jerry can full of *chang’aa*. Opposite me sat three members of the One Touch gang, Brayo (29 years old), Odhis (25 years old) and Roja (28 years old), who huddled together on a small, wobbly wooden bench trying to stay in the shadow of a piece of iron sheet roofing that was sticking out just above their heads. Roja proudly claimed to have been a member of the One Touch gang from the start. Brayo disputed this, remarking that Roja was too young and had also been in prison for four years for armed robbery. As a consequence, he had been absent during the gang’s early years. I asked how someone became a member of the One Touch gang and was told that you had to be a family member of a boss. Like Kingi, most of the young men who became members of the gang were young, male relatives of bar owners and wholesalers; without family ties it was, they said, very difficult to access work at the site and become a gang member.

Brayo and the rest told me that a young man from the Manoki area (a neighbourhood in Bondeni near the One Touch distilling site) without the said connections could become a friend and a frequent visitor to a particular distilling site. He would then be regarded by others, and himself, as belonging to the *baze*. The *baze* was a rather fluid network of friends who hung out at a particular site (Githinji 2006). As alluded to in the Introduction, we can see here a possible difference between *baze* and gang coming to the fore. Brayo explained: "You see them cutting cards (gambling) down at the *baze*, they belong to our *baze*, heheheheh ... and we are all friends, but they are not One Touch (the gang), they don’t work *rowe* ('down by the riverside' in the Kikuyu language)." So, young men who usually hung around at the killings have continued to the date of writing this book, and have actually been on the rise again since March 2013.
distilling site to gamble, and who organised short-term income-generating activities, belonged to the One Touch *baze*, but not to the One Touch gang; only the distillers regarded themselves and were seen as gang members. At the distilling site, however, the boundaries between *baze* and gang were blurry at best. The fluidity of both gang and *baze* membership, and the fact that many of the young men I met and worked with considered themselves to be members of multiple *bazes*, and sometimes gangs, contributed even further to the ambiguity of both the *baze* and gang spaces. Moreover, not all *bazes* were spaces of gang activity, but all gangs were linked to *bazes*. Unsurprisingly, most gang members such as Roja, Odhis and Brayo also considered themselves to be *baze* members. Gang members took themselves as having the upper hand in determining who belonged to the One Touch *baze* at the riverside, even if gang bosses predominantly decided on gang membership.

**Locality, family and formation processes of working gang**
Along with family, locality played a vital role in processes of working gang formation, as most family members lived near each other. As a consequence, bar owners and distillers linked to a particular distilling site generally came from or lived in the surrounding area. More specifically, most of the young men belonging to the One Touch *baze*, as well as to the One Touch gang, had been born and raised in the Manoki area, where the One Touch distilling site is located. The proximity of this site to Manoki, where the One Touch gang members had grown up, was not a coincidence. Indeed, Brayo, who was a bar owner, shared with me how most bar owners prefer to allocate assignments to their workers at a site near the bar. According to him, there are several reasons why the owners of bars in Manoki only work at this site, and never seem to divert to other distilling locations. The present-day cooking style entails filling a 180-litre drum that is positioned on an open wood fire arranged between stones or in an iron stand. Carrying the distilling mixture down to the riverside is heavy work, and so the proximity of the site to the bar or house where the distilling mixture is prepared reduces both the workload and the time needed for the entire distilling process. The other reasons at play were equally pragmatic.

Before continuing our discussion, Brayo stood up to serve a customer who had ordered a double shot of *biko* (‘the strongest distil’ in Sheng). Upon his return, he continued to discuss the localised nature of *chang’a’u* distilling networks. He said these networks included clusters of bar owners who only worked with a specific gang at a particular site. As noted in Chapter 1, small-time (predominantly female) bar owners often worked from their homes, and, as stated above, preferred to work with young, male family members. Since families in Bondeni generally lived close together, the sons, nephews, cousins and grandsons hired to work at the One Touch distilling site had often been neighbours to their future *sonko* (‘boss’ in Sheng) while growing up. Each distilling site served a surrounding area the size of a few football fields. Most of the bar owners and alcohol gang members who worked together at a particular site came from, lived and worked in this adjoining area, and this markedly foregrounded locality (intersected with family ties) in the process of working gang formation.

---

6Short-term income-generating activities, dubbed *hustling* or *ku-hustle* in Sheng (Thieme 2013), varied from brokering stolen goods to fetching water.
Brayo shared with me that gang members also felt responsible for this neighbourhood area. "Like when thieves come to our area from another mttaa, they come here, and we are like our security so we have to chase them." These words from Brayo revealed that the One Touch gang members constructed the Manoki neighbourhood area in Bondeni as 'their' mttaa ('ghetto neighbourhood' in Sheng –Mose 2013:116). Mttaa in the way these young men spoke Sheng denoted a neighbourhood area inside a ghetto village, but could also mean a ghetto village or the Mathare ghetto at large, depending on the context. In contrast, their use of the word ghetto only referred to Mathare (and other ghettos) and never to smaller localities such as ghetto villages or neighbourhood areas. Bondeni was comprised of a few neighbourhood areas like Manoki, and these were again subdivided into several bazes ('local hang-outs' in Sheng). Generally, each gang felt responsible for maintaining security in the area where its baze was located, and gangs belonging to the same mttaa often worked together, especially in larger conflicts (see Chapter 6). Most of these alcohol gang members did not, however, seek fees for their security services in the way the Mungiki and Taliban gangs had done before them; they instead commonly performed these duties to strengthen their position within their local community and gain respect. Their attachment to a specific mttaa again underscores the key role locality played in group-making processes among working gangs.

As stated above, the intimacy between bar owners and distillers was wrought by family ties and by living and working in the same mttaa. Brayo, a bar owner himself, clarified that working with young, male relatives was a way for bar owners to establish control over the distilling process. All of the men and women who participated in my research, both distillers and bar owners alike, had often described the dilemmas of creating professional relationships between family members. According to these narratives, the interactions between family members working together were more often than not imbued with distrust, jealousy and even fear. Nonetheless, both the bar owners and distillers persisted in mainly working with family. Brayo explained: "At least family, like me, I use Kanach to cook for me. Yah, he is my cousin so I help him, he helps me, that is like a duty. He cannot cheat me maybe, you know, selling my biko, ha ha piracy. He knows if I find out I can talk to his relatives." Brayo thus revealed two crucial reasons from a bar owner's viewpoint to work with family. On one hand, it enabled him to perform what he took as his 'duty', as a (slightly) more affluent family member, and it also helped him to establish control over Kanach.

Many distillers also indicated a preference for working with family bar owners, even though this denoted more restrictions of movement and space. In general, small-time bar owners paid a salary after the illegal beverage was sold. However, as selling could take a few days, workers sometimes had to wait for close to a week before getting paid. Brayo said that small-time bar owners like him usually paid his workers after selling the alcohol, because they had to invest a large sum of money in advance to buy molasses in bulk for the distilling mixture. At times, however, the business failed or the police interfered, and a bar owner was

---

7 Interestingly, however, the terms ghetto and mttaa were intermittently used to contrast 'ghetto style' (also ghetto swag in Sheng) to the style of wealthy youths described as punk (see more in Chapter 4).

8 The collaboration of family members in criminal enterprises has long been extensively researched, especially in the light of maintaining control over lower-ranked workers (see also Ianni & Ianni 1972). Despite this, various codes of such networks describe the separation of family and business.
thus unable to pay those who worked for her. Roja interjected at this point and stated that at least with family bosses a worker had more leverage, because they could also go to other relatives to pressure a bar owner into paying. "Some masonko ('bosses' in Sheng), they make excuse, they say business is low, but you know ha ha ha she eats the money (anamanga doo in Sheng)." He further elaborated that it was easier to access work through relatives: "With my uncle or mother or that aunt, she wants to see me work, to help me, so I don’t depend on them, eat at their house."

**Brotherhood and business**

In this section, I discuss a case of a young gang member who had a very troubled relationship with his brother and who wanted to share his story with me. He did not, however, want me to disclose anything else about his life, because he did not want readers to trace this story back to him. He therefore chose the name Imbo ('fake' in Sheng). He explained why he still wanted me to include his story about him and his brother: "I am down because of him, and many of us we are down because of our family, you know, family should help each other, but they keep us down to become rich, they themselves, but we are down."

Imbo was a long-term One Touch gang member, and one day shared with me his story about his troubled relationship with his oldest brother. Imbo's brother was one of the richest bar owners in Bondeni, and was rumoured to earn hundreds of Euros a day on average. He had built his "empire", as Imbo referred to it, by appropriating and selling some of their mother's informal properties and two pieces of land after her death in 1994. When their mother died, Imbo's oldest brother had been the only adult among his siblings, and the only one who knew how to sell these properties. In 1999, he had then invested these assets in setting up his own distilling site next to the One Touch gang. He had his own gang of alcohol distillers who worked solely for him. He also smuggled and sold chang'aa to almost all of the ghetto neighbourhoods in Nairobi, and had established a conglomerate of bars in Bondeni near to his own distilling site where, at all times, a minimum of 50 customers enjoyed a steady supply of their favourite drink. Imbo uttered bitterly: "My brother is a selfish, he does not care about me. He never shared anything, never helped me [...] He is not a good man." For more than four years, Imbo had worked in one of his brother's bars; he had served drinks from five in the morning until 11 at night, seven days a week. He said: "I was in prison, but I had cash. Now I have no money but my heart is full of cash." This is how he verbalised his current sense of freedom. Surrounded by the constant noise from loud, cracked music that came from large, out-dated speakers, he had worked, slept and raised his young family in a bar. Months had often passed without him going outside the vicinity of the bar, and at one time Imbo had even gone without travelling to the city centre for almost a year.

Compared to the, even by Western standards, astronomically high figure Imbo's brother earned, Imbo himself received a meagre 500 Kenyan Shillings (about 5 Euros) a day. His salary thus constituted perhaps one per cent of what his brother made. It was just enough to keep him going (as it was more than the average wage in the ghetto of 300 Kenyan Shillings), but was certainly not enough for him to save and start his own business. His brother, as he put it, had enslaved him. In 2005, I visited Imbo regularly at his brother's bar,
and we had long conversations about their relationship. During these talks, he shared with me that they even had physical fights on occasions, and that one day the police had been bribed by his brother to arrest him. However, his friends from One Touch had come to his rescue by counter-bribing the police to release him again. Eventually, Imbo left his brother’s bar with the help of the same friends, and started to work at the One Touch distilling site.\textsuperscript{9}

As well as providing insight into the often highly volatile and oppressive relationships between family members working together in the \textit{chang’aa} industry, this case also reveals a rather challenging aspect of conducting fieldwork in Mathare. It took me many years to establish the relationships of trust that enabled me to grasp the multiple layers involved in relationships, situations, processes and narratives, and yet I was still confronted daily with novel information and perspectives that shone new light on events, positions and the experiences of people. At the same time, I obtained details about people’s lives that were often highly sensitive and even downright dangerous. On the one hand, learning more about the intricacies of the lives of those in Mathare enabled me to gain a much better understanding of social processes, dynamics and relationships there. On the other hand, it bestowed on me a great sense of responsibility and the awareness to know how to avoid endangering the people I worked with at all times. I have been able tackle these challenges by involving my key research participants in the process of analysis (see Introduction). This not only favoured the depth of the analysis offered in this book, but also helped me to exclude details and analytical threads that were considered by my research participants to be potentially harmful for them.

\textbf{Other pathways to gang membership}

Returning to the question of gang membership, it is striking to consider that Brayo was regarded as a member of the One Touch gang, but had never distilled \textit{chang’aa} in his life. Brayo had grown up near the Manoki area, and owed his status as gang member to the fact that he was the son of one of the first female distillers in Bondeni Village. His mother’s legacy had thus given him the permission of the One Touch bosses to have his \textit{kango} (‘distilling mixture’ in Sheng) distilled at this site. Moreover, Brayo was a ringleader in a few other enterprises, such as controlling a \textit{matatu} terminal, and was therefore able to provide One Touch gang members with hustle opportunities. Kingi had also relied on the reputation of a female relative, his grandmother, in founding and becoming a leader of the One Touch gang, but not all members acquired access to working gangs through family members. This brings us to the question of what other trajectories, besides working for family bar owners, were open to young men wanting to become a One Touch gang member.

Not all of the One Touch gang members, and thus distillers, were relatives of bar owners. Brayo explained to me how Motion, who was 27 years old and a leading distiller at One Touch, started working at the site: "He came from the rural area, he came to Manoki first, so he came down and worked for so many drivers, doing odd jobs. They see he is good and they hire him a next time. Also they know him from before." Motion had been a \textit{baze} member

\textsuperscript{9}However, respecting Imbo’s wishes, I cannot disclose any other details about his life. Unfortunately, I was also advised not to interview Imbo’s brother by several people in Mathare for reasons I am also not at liberty to disclose here.
since the late 1990s, when he had still been a young boy selling doughnuts (mandazi in Kiswahili, a type of doughnut-bun many people eat for breakfast in Kenya) near the public toilet in Manoki. At the age of 17, Motion started working as a tout (the main distiller’s assistant), fetching firewood and doing other odd jobs at the site. He was allowed to become a tout (or conda in Sheng) because he was friends with a few leading distillers like Kingi. At times, leaders allowed non-relatives to work alongside them. As well as piracy (see above), this was another way for gang leaders to assert their control over the distilling site with regard to bar owners, and these non-relatives could become members in their own right. Motion gradually worked himself up until the non-related bar owners began to hire him directly as a driver. Again, locality comes to the fore as a key marker in working gang formation in Mathare, as access to work at the distilling site, and thus to gang membership, for non-family members primarily depended on intersecting neighbourhood and friendship ties to established distillers (drivers in Sheng). Following this trajectory to gain access took more time, as men like Motion had to prove their worth, not just to the fellow gang members, but to the bar owners as well.

In a few cases, friendship connections on their own, without neighbourhood ties, enabled young men from adjacent neighbourhoods to become a gang member and start working as a tout. During my talk with a few of the One Touch gang members at Brayo’s bar, Roja ran around the corner and suddenly re-appeared with Cosmos (a 26-year-old One Touch gang member). Cosmos had taken cover inside the small bar, despite the heat, in an attempt to hide his drunken state from me. He stood rocking on his feet while Roja punched him rather hard and stated teasingly: “He is not even Mathare damu (‘blood’ in Kiswahili), he is from the barracks (Moi Air Force Base) ha ha, but we accepted him.” Cosmos had started out as a customer, and to support his habit did odd jobs (such as cooling the drums with water or fetching firewood) at the site for 10 Kenyan Shillings (the price of one glass) per job. At first, he had not been regarded as a tout (an assistant distiller); instead he was seen as a mere customer and baze member who needed cash to feed his addiction. However, his continued presence at the site and his quality as a comedian had helped him to eventually graduate from baze member to assistant distiller, and even to the level of a driver. Both Motion and Cosmos had eventually become leading distillers and gang members without the help of family connections, but through their friendship and neighbourhood ties to local distillers.

I wondered how many members the One Touch gang had. I asked Brayo about this, and he interestingly replied: “Sometimes 50!” Kingi, during a different conversation, also replied in a similar vein, and stated that the gang had between 30 and 50 members. Both Kingi and Brayo claimed that the total depended primarily on the availability of work, which fluctuated according to the seasons, police activity and sugar prices. During the December holiday, for instance, work was usually plentiful and membership could even exceed 50, as bar owners stocked up to meet the Christmas demand. Conversely, the number of steady distillers, approximately 30 on average, shrunk as soon as sugar prices began to rise, which made it harder for bar owners to earn a profit. Throughout my most recent fieldwork periods, the group of steady distillers at One Touch waned from around 35 to 20 members. This decline was a direct result of the legalisation of chang’aa (which, as stated above, increased
competition) and the rise of sugar and other food prices that occurred at the same time (Nzuma 2013). The senior drivers and their assistants had family ties to the bar owners, and remained the core distillers. The more occasional distillers were mostly baze members with fewer connections to the bar owners. Yet, even the senior gang members with family ties to the bar owners approached work with great anxiety; they constantly worried about it, and spent days on end waiting for an assignment and coaxing bar owners (family and otherwise) into giving them jobs to do. Most of the distillers I worked with did not work for more than three days a week on average, but spent every day of the week down by the site, afraid to miss out on an opportunity.

**Non-membership: older men and women**

Along with family connections, locality, friendship and the availability of work, age also seemed to be another important criterion for gang membership, as most of the distillers were between 18 and 35 years old. Brayo told me: "Ah, you don't see wazee ('old men' in Kiswahili) down there, it is a hard job, too heavy for them." I teasingly reminded him that before the advent of distilling gangs, older women and men had seemed perfectly capable of operating heavy drums and spending days of hard physical labour in the face of the hot sun or torrential rain. Brayo laughed and remembered his mother who had distilled her own alcohol at Kinatiko, day in and day out. "I think nowadays, it is like our job, for wasee ('young men' in Sheng). Also, you can't brew when you are 40, you have to leave." Brayo was a bar owner, not a distiller, but given that he was part of the One Touch gang he spoke from the vantage point of a distiller. Brayo was referring here to the division of labour between young, male distillers and older, mostly female, bar owners that occurred after the founding of the One Touch gang. By referring to it as "our job", Brayo and other young men like him were able to claim entitlement and status. Interestingly, Brayo stated that older men had to leave the gang, and here he drew on the locally prevalent notion of working gangs as age-sets of junior men (see more below). The alcohol gangs encountered the problem of age for the first time during my more recent fieldwork periods, as the gang had only come up quite recently. Many of the young men who had joined these gangs late 1990s passed the age of 30 during the time I was conducting research with them for this book. Moreover, leaving the gang had been less difficult before the steep rises in the price of sugar and other foodstuff, and before the emergence of growing competition from other ghetto areas from 2000 onwards. The pressure to leave the gang on gang members over the age of 30 became the main push factor behind the establishment of collective businesses and other projects to help members leave (see more on this in the next few chapters).

Along with age and the other aforementioned factors, gender also determined gang membership, as I never met a woman who considered herself to be, and was taken as, a member of an alcohol gang. In May 2012, I walked down the slippery alleyway that connected the One Touch distilling site to Mau Mau Avenue (see Map 5). A woman in her late 30s, dressed in faded red jeans and an oversized dark blue t-shirt smeared with soot, stood barefoot in the dirty river amidst garbage, holding a tube directly above the mouth of a jerry can. A clear fluid dripped steadily from the tube. Alongside her, two male distillers were doing
the same. A few other male distillers were busy adjusting the fires between the stones, and others still were cooling the drums with river water to prevent them from overheating and exploding. Out of the reach of the bombs, a group of men (baze members) sat on the ground near the open sewer. They were gambling while drinking chang'aa. The sight of the woman operating a drum struck me as highly unusual. I had often observed female bar owners sitting high up on the cliffs supervising the distilling process to make sure the distillers did not steal from them. However, I had never seen a woman among the men doing the same hot, heavy and dirty work. The woman was in the middle of the most delicate phase of distilling (cooling the vapour and directing the alcoholic liquid into the jerry can), and hardly acknowledged my presence, yet I could not take my eyes off her. Mato, a long-term One Touch gang member, squatted beside me and I asked him who she was. He laughed and sneered: "You don't know? Ha ha ha. She is a sonko (boss in Sheng), but she does not trust us, she wants to distil her own kango."

Mato said that the woman was not regarded as a member of the gang, which was, to me, emphasised by the way the other distillers interacted with her; as usual, they engaged in vivid conversations with each other, sharing jokes, drinking and smoking, but they completely ignored her. At first, I thought that maybe she was not perceived to be part of the One Touch gang because she was a bar owner, but Brayo, Mato and Motion were also bar owners and they were still considered to be gang members. Then, it dawned on me that the distillers at the One Touch distilling site did not regard her as a fellow gang member solely because she was a woman. There are many gangs in Mathare, for instance groups involved in stealing (both in and outside the ghetto), which have both male and female members. As a result, I initially took the woman as a gang member as well. However, distilling was reconstructed solely as a 'young man's job' after the shift in the mid-1990s and the ensuing division of labour between the predominantly female bar owners and the male gang members. Moreover, the distilling style had changed, and gang members nowadays used larger drums and bigger fires, requiring a lot of physical strength. Accordingly, the process of distilling

---

10 Since 2010, more and more men have gradually become gang bosses in Bondeni. Indeed, although women still dominate the industry today, their numbers have fallen significantly. This is the result of two converging developments. Firstly, a few gang members garnered enough social and economic capital to join the ranks of gang bosses. These young men had to pay at least 200 Euros to the group of alcohol bosses from one distilling site, which is an amount of money that only a few could produce and only with the help of family members. Accordingly, the young men who broke through the ranks of alcohol bosses were often designated as heirs or add-ons to existing businesses. At the same time that a few new young, male bosses established themselves, tensions between the Taliban and local gangs in Shantit led to the mass evacuation of a group of what was locally termed ‘refugee families from Uganda.’ These families had been involved in cooking busaa because chang’aa (with a higher profit margin) had been tightly controlled by just a few families in Shantit. During the violence, these Ugandan families moved a few 100 metres further down Mau Mau Avenue, and settled in the heart of Bondeni. At the time of writing this chapter, these tensions were still ongoing, and the Ugandan families had temporarily settled among other Ugandan families in Kosovo, Mathare, where they continue to sell chang’aa and busaa.
chang’aa and the actual distilling site was locally taken as a 'male' space, whereas selling the drink (and sex) continued to be mostly the domain of women (see Chapter 1). I will delve further into the contingent relationship between men and women in Bondeni, and why certain spaces were constructed as either male or female, in Chapter 5. It is enough to state here that the woman’s decision to distil her own kango at the One Touch site traversed the gender roles that were dominant in the division of labour with regard to distilling chang’aa, and so was met with great contempt by male distillers. This was illustrated to me by both Mato’s sneer when he explained her position, and the way the other distillers snubbed her. According to them, she was doing ‘their’ job, and as such not only denied them work, but also their claim to the distilling process and the space of the gang, all of which had become part of their gendered sense of the self. However, the fact that she continued to distil by herself shows that she was backed up by the other bosses, and this support helped her to resist the resentful stares she received at the site.

Gangs as age-sets
In the section above, Brayo had already alluded to age as an important factor in gang formation, and this emanated from the popular conceptualisation of working gangs as age-sets of junior men in Mathare. In this vein, working gangs were taken as pre-senior social and economic networks through which young men were able to prepare themselves for senior manhood. Accordingly, gang membership was only considered to be appropriate for men within a certain age-bracket. Most of the gangs in Bondeni formed around groups of young, recently circumcised, men who lived and worked together. Kingi elaborated:

It was me and Buda’s brother, at One Touch, we shared a room, also with Maich. I was young when I wanted to be circumcised, you know I was too independent hahaha. You remember the other side (in Mathare, across the river)? It was like a shamba (vegetable garden in Kiswahili)? We played football, and we swim there, and it had those plants, with white flowers, that is what we used to rub on our penises, and then it get infected. I did that to force circumcision, it gets infected they bring you to hosí ('hospital' in Sheng) to cut, they have to because you have a wound there. I was very young, first Shosho did not agree so I used these flowers ha ha. [...] Remember I told you before, I slept in a bed behind her house, and after circumcision I was 14, I moved together with Kevo and Maich. We all worked rowe, like leaders. They were a bit older and also circumcised [...] No, not at the same time. That is not how we do it. Ha ha, they torture you. I stayed with Uncle (in his house in the Nairobi ghetto Kangemi), older guys they come to beat you, like at night, and elders come to advice you, how to be a man. Sometimes a lady is brought...that is painful, because you have a wound ha ha. It is an abuse...I don’t want that for my son when he is circumcised. You have to eat uncooked food, or pili pili ('hot peppers’ in Kiswahili) and drink too much, dirty water... so much you vomit...Some boys they die because of infection...even today!
I have discussed circumcision with 21 young men in Mathare with a variety of different ethnic backgrounds (see more below), and many depicted a similar sequence of events as recounted by Kingi, although most boys waited until a parent or elder family member initiated the ceremony. Many of the men with whom I discussed their circumcision were operated at a nearby hospital by a doctor. After this hospital visit, the young men generally moved into a house with slightly older male relatives for the duration of the rite of passage (mostly a week). On the first day, mothers, aunties and other female family members cooked festive dishes and sang and danced together to kick off a week of healing, education and transition. After this day, female members, especially the mother, as most interlocutors claimed, were not allowed to be in contact with the ‘boy-in-transition’ for the duration of the ceremony. The male family member with whom the boy-in-transition stayed (usually an older cousin or a young uncle) commonly lived in Mathare or one of the other Nairobi ghettos. Three of the men I interviewed still had close relatives (such as parents or grandparents) upcountry, and had travelled to the rural area to undergo this rite of passage. The majority of the young men had, however, stayed in the city and most did not have a father.

In the absence of a father, an older maternal uncle was usually in charge of organising a group of older uncles, grandfathers, elderly male neighbours and elderly male family friends who visited the boy-in-transition in the evenings. For a period of a week, these ‘elders’, as they were referred to, educated the boy-in-transition on issues related to what they deemed to constitute ‘being a man’. What’s more, all of the men who had undergone this rite in the city (as opposed to the rural area) spoke of groups of older, recently circumcised, men from the same mtaa who came to the house during the week of transition in the middle of the night to beat them and make them do things that would ‘toughen them up’ (such as eating hot peppers and food waste, or drinking lots of cold and dirty water). After a week or so, most of these young men moved into a house with other male friends near their old family home in Bondeni, and were from now on expected to live independently of their family. Sharing a house with other recently circumcised young men was often a pragmatic solution to dividing the burden of rent and other living costs. These men often joined their peers at the distilling site, and started working as distillers for family alcohol bosses to earn their own money and contribute to school fees and other necessities for younger siblings.11

**From criminal to respected gang member**

In 2005, I conducted research with Buda, who was 28 at the time. As a boy, he had been involved in stealing both in and outside the ghetto. The emic term that people in Mathare used to refer to thieves was *mgondi* (‘thief’ in Sheng). Gangs involved in stealing were generally termed *wagondi* (plural for *mgondi* in Sheng). A closer look at Buda’s transition from *mgondi* to distiller, and the meanings he attached to his (in his words) “transformation”, show the

---

11 Many residents told me that in recent years more children in Mathare attend secondary school than every before as a result of free primary education and scholarship programs by the government. Despite corruption and so called “hidden fees”, families are now able to send more children to school than in previous years. However, the transition from high school to college or the job market is still erratic as ever.
importance of circumcision in a young man’s life trajectory in Bondeni Village. As noted, the wagondi gangs were perceived in a very different light to the alcohol and drug gangs, because stealing was locally considered to be a crime. During the 1990s, local wagondi gangs (these are groups that stole inside the ghetto) were mostly comprised of uncircumcised boys, whereas the members of alcohol and drug gangs were mainly circumcised young men. As a consequence, these latter groups were considered to be more mature networks than the local wagondi gangs Buda had belonged to as a boy. In 2005, Buda stated that, in his words, circumcision had “reformed” him. During a more recent fieldwork period (July 2010-June 2011), we revisited our old interviews together, and he again repeatedly emphasised how important circumcision had been to him.

Until the age of 16, Buda had lived what he termed, with an intertextual reference to 2pac (2pac 1994), a “thug’s life.” As a young child, he had dropped out of school because he was severely dyslexic, which was a condition that was unfamiliar to most of his teachers, who had taken him to be lazy and had punished him harshly. From the age of seven, he began to skip school and started begging for money in the city centre. Later, he joined a gang of local wagondi, and experimented with all kinds of drugs and alcohol which helped him, in his words: “To get a boostah (by which he meant courage) to go and rob people.” He was the last-born in his family, and his older siblings were either busy working with his mother in the thriving family chang’aa business or going to school. Feeling like an outcast in his own family, Buda explained that the local wagondi gang (which had many different names) became his substitute family when he was aged between seven and 15. He told me that he was able to finally leave the wagondi gang, after several failed attempts, when his mother decided that the time to circumcise him had arrived.

People started to notice that I was doing bad things. In Bondeni. They started to complain with my mother. She did not love me then. Most of the guys I know were in a (wagondi) gang …but some were from families who did not have a stealing heart (by which he meant ‘not having members who were involved in stealing’) and they did not start. My family also did not have a stealing heart but I was young. I only had my brother, the rest was older. I felt peer pressure and I wanted material things. I saw friends in good trousers and I wanted good things too. The easiest way is stealing. People really feared us […] I think sometimes I could die and I am happy for my change. I could be dead now, shot by police. Or mob justice […] I changed when I was circumcised because your company changes. You are not allowed to walk with uncircumcised boys. The guys I walked with were big and had big ideas. I changed, no more sniffing glue. I slept everywhere before I was circumcised, after that I had my own place. I felt proud and I did not want to disappoint my mother and my brother. […] I was ready to change and I was ready for the responsibility. The elders from my community educated me on my behaviour, I felt good about that, I felt I could do it. I was circumcised with Msaja (a friend). We had to eat uncooked sukuma (a tough kind of kale) as a test of manhood and samosa with pili pili (samosas are Indian
inspired pastries). They just tell you to eat it. When I did bad things after circumcision they (the elders who had educated him) took me and punished me. They could beat me with a rungu (‘a club’ in Kiswahili) or a belt... that is much worse. My mother can’t come in to stop them... that would break the custom. One time I decided to lost because of the beating. They took me again and fed me samosa with pili pili. [...] I was 17 when I was circumcised... sometimes a young lady is invited to torture you but not in my case. Eeeh! That is too painful. After the clinic there is a big party, women are singing and there is food. You are educated by your elders. My age mates and elders come into my room to congratulate me and give me support. Now I am a grown-up and people fear (‘respect’ in Sheng) me. Sometimes in Kikuyu custom it is too early and young guys ha ha ha they become very arrogant. It depends on your mentality. I was sooo bad and it was the right time for me, I became good. I became educated. I was mature enough, ready for it. These other guys might enter (wagondi) gangs and start to do bad things because now they believe no one can stop them. With me it was the other way around.

Every time Buda talked about circumcision, his chest swelled with pride. The attention he received from the elders and friends helped him to develop a new sense of belonging outside his wagondi gang. Following his circumcision, he moved into his own house and worked as an alcohol distiller for his mother. He had already been a baze member at the One Touch distilling site, and many gang members also worked for his mother. He thus left the wagondi gang of younger uncircumcised boys, and joined the more mature One Touch gang by becoming a full-time alcohol distiller. Accordingly, Buda became more respected by his family, friends and neighbours, and this had a positive impact on his gendered sense of the self.

Circumcision and peer pressure among gang members

A majority of ethnic groups in Kenya practice male circumcision as a rite of passage for boys between the ages of eight and 16 (Spronk 2012:96/181-186). The performance of this rite was not set in stone, but varied immensely according to ethnic group, social class, and the urban and rural setting. These practices were under constant negotiation, not just to fit new and ever-changing social dynamics and settings, but also new belief systems. In the urban settings of Nairobi, young men were, for instance, hardly expected to build their own house, or even move out of the family home. Consequently, people improvised with such practices to suit local contexts and popular perspectives and values.

Mathare constituted a particular kind of urban setting that did enable young men to move into a house of their own after circumcision, since renting was cheaper here compared to other urban neighbourhoods. Most families lived in one-room housing facilities sharing 6 square metres between a minimum of four people. This lack of privacy caused many families here to seek alternative housing for their teenage children. In Mathare, it was deemed to be highly inappropriate for circumcised (or otherwise mature) junior men to sleep in the same room as their sisters and mothers. They were permitted to become sexually active (Spronk
2012: 181-186), and as such were entitled to some form of privacy. Likewise, it was considered to be an affront to local notions of respectability if mature girls (that is girls who had started their menstrual periods) continued to sleep in the same room as their fathers. Although girls were not actively encouraged to engage in sex (often on the contrary), they were considered to be sexually attractive after having their first period. Yet, most households consisted of single mothers, and it was therefore more common for mature boys to leave the house than mature girls. The latter were thus able to continue sharing the single-room house with their single mothers without breaching popular morals, whereas the young men had to move out to protect the honour of their family.

A week after he was circumcised, Kingi moved in with Kevo, who was his childhood friend and a leader of the One Touch gang. Despite his Luo identification, Kevo had been circumcised a year before Kingi. Most of the young men I discussed their circumcision with identified as Kikuyu, three identified as Luo and four with other ethnic groups such as Kamba. Strikingly, the Luo group does not normally practice male circumcision as a rite of passage into adulthood (see also Izugbara et al. 2013; Ahlberg & Njoroge 2013; Spronk 2012). Accordingly, many of the young men who identified as Luo in Mathare had not undergone circumcision. Why then did a few men with Luo backgrounds in Bondeni practice male circumcision? There is no easy answer to this question, but some enlightenment has to be sought in what OC, one of the One Touch gang members with a Luo background, dubbed “the effects of peer pressure”:

The Kikuyu they say you are not a man without circumcision, they say we (men with a Luo background) are not men. And they are our friends, all of them they do this and become men, so we do it to feel like a man. Ha ha, you know at Kiharu, they took Richie (a member of the Kiharu gang with a Luo background) to hosí (hospital in Sheng) to circumcise, they can’t accept you if you are not a man, ha ha ha.

As noted in Chapter 1, a slight majority of Bondeni residents were considered to have a Kikuyu background. OC said that most of his friends who had this background and had undergone this rite of passage made fun of alcohol gang members who were not circumcised. This, according to OC, prompted many of the gang members with Luo backgrounds to follow suit, and they went to a nearby hospital to undergo ‘the cut’, as it was commonly referred to. OC thus revealed that circumcision even determined gang membership at a distilling site, further illustrating the important role of this rite of passage in men-to-men relationships and gang networks in Bondeni. The representation of uncircumcised men as ‘boys’ in Bondeni was drawn from the political discourse that was forged by the Kenyatta era (1964-1978). This label was aimed at pitting the Luo group against the Kikuyu group (Ahlberg & Njoroge 2013; Throup & Hornsby 1998; Wa Wamwere 2003), and continues to be appropriated by politicians, mainly with a Kikuyu background, in political discourse today in an attempt to discredit their counterparts with a Luo background. These imaginings resonated deeply with many of the young men in Bondeni, and shaped popular ideas on what constituted being a
man. OC concluded that he too had been circumcised and added with a smile: "Kikuyu girls are so beautiful, they can't accept you if you are not circumcised."

Circumcision was a widespread practice in Bondeni (and in most of the other ghetto villages in Mathare). It marked a phase of growing independence among young men. Groups of circumcised young men in specific localities such as Manoki formed small networks of friends that often became part of existing or emerging gangs. A few years after his circumcision, Kingi founded the One Touch gang with the other local young men who worked rowe. In this vein, we can understand their move to an independent site as an act to underline their newly-acquired social status as circumcised men in relation to their older female relatives who were also their bosses. Kingi, Kevo and Maich were the lead distillers at the One Touch distilling site during its inception, because they were connected to the most influential bar owners (like Shosho Kingi and Kevo's mother), and they subsequently received more assignments than other distillers. They formed a posse, namely a small group of friends within a baze, and together with other posses (other small groups of young, mostly circumcised, men from the Manoki area) formed the One Touch baze. Some men referred to their posse as riika, which means age group in the Kikuyu language (see also Lonsdale 2003:56-60). The term riika is connected to the Kikuyu word ituika, which denotes a generational transformation of power (Kenyatta 1938:196; Lonsdale 1992:344-350). Both concepts have been highly politicised, especially since the Mau Mau struggle during the colonial era. Some young Mau Mau fighters used these terms to grasp their own unease and impatience with the older nationalist leaders (see also Ogot 2003:10; Lonsdale 2003:56-60). Nowadays, these concepts are often deployed in popular discourse to describe the frustrations of growing groups of young leaders in relation to established elites (Kagwanja 2005). In the following chapters, I will flesh out and elucidate why and how these notions resonated with young men in conceptualising their deteriorating social position. For now, it suffices to state that the use of the term riika with respect to a posse did not include all of the young men of the same age or in the same locality, and nor did it refer to all of the young men who were circumcised around the same time. The new meanings that were brought to riika in Mathare, that is denoting a small group of young men who started living together after circumcision, were wrought by the social and economic changes in this ghetto during the 1990s. The Sheng term that these young men also used was mabeshte ('friends' in Sheng). Although this word was often used in very broad ways, and could also include people one hardly knew, it was also used to describe the ties of brotherhood within these posses.

The baze was constituted of a fluid network of small groups (posses) of neighbourhood friends (mabeshte) through which its members sought the social and economic support they previously received from their families (especially from their mothers). Kingi reminisced: "We (the posse) worked rowe, like a company ha ha ha and if we had money we cooked together. Sometimes I ate at my Shosho. When I had a girl, I tell Kevo and Maich to go somewhere else, ha ha. One time I had a girl for two weeks ha ha ha." Tellingly, these men were not expected to

---

12 The term riika was also more broadly used by ghetto residents to describe people who were the same age – and not only by those who spoke the Kikuyu language.
contribute financially to the family household other than doing chores, such as fetching water in the morning or picking up younger siblings from school, and perhaps chipping in for school fees for these brothers and sisters. In return, they could not, however, rely on being catered for, even though they would still occasionally join in with family meals. In a way, their relative independence relieved the family household of another mouth to feed, as these young men were expected to largely fend for themselves.

As noted above, a majority of gang members in Mathare started their gang membership by living with other gang members after circumcision. In this vein, circumcision can be taken as an initiation rite into the gang, and can thus be compared to the wide variety of initiation practices (such as beat ins, gang rapes, or the act of committing murder on behalf of the gang) among gangs in other cities worldwide (see also Vigil 1996). Similar to many other types of initiation among gangs worldwide, circumcision in Bondeni marked the transition from boy to young and independent man and member of a brotherhood, and provided proof of courage, commitment and perseverance. This may, to some extent, explain why young men with Luo backgrounds also practiced circumcision; to them, it meant initiation into the working gang. From the day these young men became gang members, their everyday lives were geared towards garnering social – connections, skills and status – and economic capital – money, long-term employment/businesses and material goods – (see also Bourdieu 1986) in order to gradually gain full independence from the gang. Aiming to leave the gang was thus an inherent part of becoming a gang member for the working gangs in Mathare. This stands in stark contrast to the way some gangs in other parts of the world (such as the USA) regard leaving a gang. In a personal discussion with a former leader of the Gangsters Disciples Detroit in March 2014, this young African-American man told me that leaving the gang had involved an extremely sensitive and long journey for him, as it was commonly taken by his peers to be defection and thus a sign of ultimate betrayal. Likewise, the Mungiki gangs were commonly perceived to punish defectors (Kwamboka 2004). Accordingly, the coupling of gang membership with the objective of leaving the gang, which is central to working gangs in Mathare, seems to be quite exceptional with respect to many local and international gang practices.

Many working gang members in Mathare took several steps towards independence and, as such, towards achieving senior manhood, including marriage and becoming a father. Accordingly, these young men slowly grew into their role as men during their gang membership with regard to their extended family (parents, wives, children, family-in-law and so on) and to their local 'community.' The responsibilities they had in relation to their own wives and children, and to their parents and other family members, steadily increased as these gang members grew older and obtained more social and economic capital. Most men were expected to leave the gang in or around their early 30s at the latest in order to fully take up their role as senior men. When asked about this during a focus group discussion in January 2011, the One Touch gang members imagined and defined being a fully recognised man mostly in terms of: 'being a provider', 'making family decisions', 'helping younger and poorer relatives' (financially and with advice), and 'taking part in and chairing community activities.' Gang membership thus structured the process of becoming senior men in Bondeni, helping
men to progressively move from boyhood to junior and, eventually, senior manhood. As a consequence, leaving the gang was not only part of becoming a gang member, but was also part of becoming a senior man. The next chapter will, however, also reveal that this was extremely difficult.

**Conclusion**

This chapter traced the history of the emergence of a particular working gang, namely the alcohol gang, and looked at its role and position in the local political economy. It first examined why distilling alcohol was considered to be work in popular binaries between licit and illicit practices to generate income. These binaries drew on state law and dominant discourses on morality, but reimagined certain aspects to fit local experiences of what constituted crime and work. In these conceptualisations, distilling alcohol was taken as a respectable way to earn an income for young men. This was partly informed by the failure of the law inside the ghettoscape, following entrenched illegal practices by local police, such as taking bribes from alcohol and drugs bosses and killing criminal suspects on sight. The notion of respectability with regard to alcohol distilling was also shaped by the dangers involved in stealing, which was one of the few other options open to young men to generate an income. Working for an alcohol gang was taken to be a safer and financially more stable option, and contributed to an industry that directly and indirectly fed most of the families in this ghetto village.

The rise of the alcohol gang marked a shift in labour divisions. Increasingly, women, and also a few older men, were in charge of selling the alcohol, whereas young men mostly started out their independent lives by working for these gang bosses. This chapter showed that gang membership was predominantly determined by family ties to gang bosses, although other pathways to becoming a gang member were also relatively commonplace. In contrast to other types of gang, such as brokers of stolen goods and thieves, the alcohol gang was a male only space. Locally, the alcohol gang was taken as an age-set for recently circumcised men. This shows how rites of passage were reinvented to fit local experiences and notions of manhood. The fact that gang members with Luo backgrounds also practiced this rite of passage reveals the fluidity and contingency of ethnic identifications, and underscores the fact that these groups were multi-ethnic and mostly based on locality and notions of work. Within the space of the gang, young men enacted popular and shifting notions of manhood that marked major transitions in their life. Interestingly, young men like OC did not feel any less Luo for adhering to such notions, despite the fact that these deviated from the cultural practices generally associated with their ethnic backgrounds and despite the vigorous debates about this practice in dominant political discourses. For many young ghetto men (regardless of their ethnic background), circumcision was part of an initiation into working gangs, and these groups structured the processes of becoming senior men by helping these young men to garner social and economic capital, with the goal being to eventually establish themselves as head of their (extended) family. This chapter revealed that all of the young men I conducted research with shared the desire to achieve this status, and this longing significantly shaped their individual social navigation trajectories.
At the same time, however, these men depended mostly on women for access to work and to earn money. Even their performances of manhood within the space of the gang often took place under the powerful gaze of women watching over their alcohol. These locally divergent gender relations – as compared to dominant gender roles – brought about extreme tensions between young men and women that will be further explored in the following chapters. This chapter also revealed that the process of becoming a gang member was intertwined with the process of leaving the gang, and both were key steps in becoming senior men. In the next chapter I will reveal why alcohol gang membership was increasingly considered to be a trap by young men in Mathare during the first decade of the new millennium, unlike attitudes in the 1990s. I will look at both individual and collective and failed and successful trajectories constructed by young, male gang members to try and leave the working gang. This will also help to provide insight into the mounting violence in Mathare during the same period, as these young men grew older and became more frustrated with their junior positions.
CHAPTER 3: Leaving the Gang: Masculinities, Mind-sets and Marriages.

Introduction
The emergence of alcohol distilling gangs in Mathare, heralded by the founding of the One Touch gang in 1994, provided young men in this ghetto with safer ways to generate income than stealing. Several wagondi groups (involved in stealing in and outside the ghetto) joined the up and coming alcohol gangs in the late 1990s, and soon the ghetto counted five thriving distilling sites offering work to hundreds of young men who lacked the required education and connections to be gainfully employed elsewhere. Many of these men were primary or secondary school dropouts, and working at the distilling site was one of the few long-term options open to them. Other opportunities, such as stealing, brokering stolen goods and doing chores in the neighbourhood (such as fetching water), were commonly short-term and, as a consequence, highly erratic (and at times even risky). A few of the men occasionally joined the daily queues at nearby construction sites, but work was scarce and there was a lot of competition for the available jobs. However, despite the long-term employment offered by gangs, most young gang members wanted and struggled to leave. As explored in the previous chapter, working gangs were locally taken as age-sets of recently circumcised (or otherwise mature) young men that allowed them to garner social and economic capital in order to gradually achieve senior manhood. However, to become fully recognised and respected as senior men according to popular notions (Willemse 2009:218), they were expected to leave the gang and become independent at around the age of 30. What kind of strategies and pathways did these young, male gang members construct and navigate to leave the working gang? And why did the majority of these gang members fail to leave despite the great effort they expended on trying to do so?

In this chapter, I first describe a collective trajectory initiated by the One Touch gang members that was geared towards helping them to leave the working gang (this occurred during one of my more recent fieldwork periods – 2010-2011 – and the gang members involved me in it). I also explore the challenges these men faced in trying to leave the group, and delve deeper into why many of these predicaments seemed, to them, to be tied to imagining and enacting different and seemingly conflicting positions of manhood. Then, I continue to discuss the impact of feeling trapped in the social position of a junior man on gendered senses of the self, as told to me by many of the young ghetto men. I also consider how uncertainties about the future shaped everyday practices such as drinking heavily. I conclude this chapter by taking a closer look at Kingi’s successful trajectory to leaving the One Touch gang in an attempt to reveal how his success hinged on his connections to alcohol bosses, the period in which he tried to leave and, most importantly, his partnership with his wife. This helps me to highlight the multiple obstacles the One Touch gang members encountered in more recent times, and why the majority of the current gang members failed to leave, even after instigating a joint attempt to do so. I therefore set out to analyse the social predicaments that young men increasingly faced when the gang space
seemed to become a more permanent phase in their life trajectories; instead of being a space that helped young ghetto men in their transition to senior manhood, the gang space became increasingly imagined by these young men as an obstacle to building meaningful lives. Accordingly, this chapter shows how these young gang members reflected upon changes in their social environments, how this influenced their future opportunities and constraints, and how they redrew trajectories, both individually and collectively, to continue pursuing their dream of becoming senior men.

Aspiring to leave

In the face of very few long-term employment opportunities (UNDP 2013) outside the gang, most gang members considered setting up micro-businesses inside the ghetto (such as bars, road-side restaurants, kiosks or electrical appliance shops) as a viable alternative that would help them become autonomous and leave the group. These men regarded grocery stalls as a feminine option, and even though they were potentially quite profitable (even during periods of high inflation rates – see also Nzuma 2013), they preferred to engage in businesses they considered to be more masculine. Due to rising food prices and concomitant higher living costs, it became increasingly difficult for these men to develop individual micro-businesses that would eventually enable them to leave the gang. Accordingly, some chang’aa groups engaged in collective income-generating activities. During my more recent fieldwork periods, I became involved with one such project.

One morning in early October 2010, I carefully descended the narrow and slippery pathway to rowe (the 'riverside' in the Kikuyu language), as I did almost every day. I was met by a few One Touch gang members who forcibly grabbed my arms and shouted excitedly in my face. They dragged me along the rocky, slippery alleyway and sat me down on an empty jerry can near the drums. Despite the morning hour, it was already hot and dusty. The foul smell of human waste was something I had become used to, as there were open sewers scattered throughout the ghetto, but it always took me a few minutes to adapt to the heat and smoke coming from the drums positioned on the river banks. With admiration, I watched a young man adjusting the fires of two drums below me while I was catching my breath. I remember thinking how incredibly difficult this work must be, and then it hit me: only two drums; normally, the One Touch gang had at least six lined up! Lately, however, the work had seemed to be steadily declining.

The young man at the drums joined the rest of his fellow gang members, who were all squatting around me. There was something different about them that day. By now, they had grown accustomed to me hanging around their distilling spot, and they usually continued gambling or working while I was there. However, the reception I got that day told me something was most definitely up, and the expectant looks on their faces confirmed my suspicion. Motion smiled right at me, his face only a few inches away from mine, meaning that I could smell the stale alcohol on his breath: "You can help us, Naomi. All we need here is ideas, we lack ideas, you can give us ideas." The rising sun lit up his scarred face, and his blood shot eyes were beaming with eagerness and something else. Like most of the One Touch gang members, he had woken up to the shaking hands that only a glass of


*chang’aa* could alleviate. Cosmos interrupted impatiently: "We want to be a group like before and start a business, *chang’aa* is down, *ngutu* (‘sugar waste’ in Kiswahili) is too expensive. What do you think we can do to change this life?” He gestured to the two drums, “This is not a life!”

**Group trajectories to leave the gang**

In 2007, the One Touch gang members had already registered as a youth group in order to try and access funds from the government (*see also* Okoth et al. 2013), as this would enable them to develop income-generating activities other than distilling and hustling. The certificate received upon registration had allowed the gang to officially (that is, with the approval of the chief) manage the Manoki public toilet for money. At the time, I had helped the group to link up with a Dutch graffiti artist to paint and decorate the toilet. This, according to the gang’s leaders, would give extra allure to the facility that would help them to increase daily revenues. At their request, I also held various meetings with them to both discuss the way forward for the newly-registered youth group and see how it could develop more long-term income-generating activities. Unfortunately, the One Touch gang as a youth group broke up soon after these meetings, as a few of the leaders had embezzled the small amount of funding it had managed to access. Nevertheless, long after the official group ceased to exist, I continued meeting with individual One Touch gang members to discuss how they could access the few local development programmes that also targeted young men in the area. This was not, however, very successful. Most of the organisations operating in Mathare were led by people who came from outside this ghetto, and they regarded the gang members as criminals. Likewise, many of the young men from the One Touch group harboured grave suspicions in relation to most development organisations operating in Mathare. Indeed, they told me of several negative experiences with particular organisations (*see more in Chapter 5*) that had allegedly used their “stories”, as they put it (meaning their life histories), to access funds without them benefitting in any way.

Cosmos had not been part of the One Touch gang when it was registered as a youth group, but he had heard of the earlier successes and failures, and saw an opportunity when I started my research. He said:

> It is good you tell our story, yes. But you are here for a very long time, and you see work is low. I know before we did not listen. We saw other members go to get a loan, some even went to school. We know only *chang’aa* and stayed down, money was ok, so why go? We did not believe they would succeed, we did not believe you...But now work is low and work is hard, we earn nothing, most days there is no work. We drink because there is no work. We want to start our own group.

Kingi, who was one of the founders of the One Touch gang, had been able to leave it in 2007 through a loan scheme offered by Safi, and this organisation had hired him in 2008 to coordinate its youth programme (*see Chapter 1*). In 2008 and 2009, Kingi had tried to
encourage the One Touch gang members to revive the youth group and connect to opportunities at different development organisations (including Safi). Only four gang members had taken him up on his offer, but they were now the proud owners of large businesses (such as a firewood business, a large bar and a matatu). Another younger man had gone to school through a scholarship programme at Safi and had graduated as a web designer within a year. He now worked as a social media strategist at Amnesty Kenya and as a freelance web designer for big companies in the city centre. Cosmos knew about these successes, and explained that it was only after work at the riverside began to decline in September 2010, as a result of the legalisation of chang’aa (BBC 2010) and rising sugar prices (see also Nzuma 2013), that more gang members began to consider other options. Also, the majority of the current gang members were getting older without seeing possible ways out of the group, and the social pressure to take up the position of a recognised senior man was beginning to take its toll.

I suggested a visit to one of the One Touch gang leaders, Brayo, who was also good friends with Kingi. Cosmos, Motion and I therefore went to see Brayo to further discuss the plan at his bar, which was located a few dozen metres up the alleyway from the One Touch distilling site. Brayo instantly phoned Kingi and Monga, who were working at the Safi office near the gas station on Juja Road, asking them to join our discussion. Monga had also been a One Touch gang member until he had been able to set up his own kiosk in Dandora, outside the Mathare ghetto. Like Kingi, he had also been partly supported by a loan programme from Safi, and had also been hired by the organisation in October 2010 to help Kingi with coordinating the expanding youth programmes. Together, we brainstormed until late in the afternoon on the content of what they dubbed the “One Touch outreach programme”, and we planned the first meeting a few days later.

The initial problem with implementing this programme arose on the first day that the 20 participating One Touch gang members had planned to meet with Kingi for its launch: no one showed up. After waiting for two hours at Brayo’s bar, which is where they had agreed to meet, Kingi, Brayo and I walked around Mathare to locate the men and find out what had happened. We found Motion down at the distilling site operating a drum. He apologised and told us that he could not “ignore money.” Cosmos, meanwhile, was fast asleep in the small iron sheet structure at the baze, which was dubbed State House, after drinking himself into a stupor early in the morning. The others had remained at the baze when Cosmos and Motion had not shown any signs of preparing to leave for the meeting. After several more failed attempts to get together, we agreed with the gang leaders (Motion, Brayo and Cosmos) to organise a bi-weekly trip involving the entire group to the Arboretum National Park on the other side of the city. Leaving early in the morning with a hired matatu helped the gang members to remain sober, and both the prospect of an excursion and the fact that we provided transport and lunch persuaded them to join us. We also agreed to come back early enough (around 4pm) for the men to resume work and earn at least half a day’s wages before going home at night.

Meeting between trees, without the noise, dust and constant pull of the baze in Mathare, worked out really well. So, for seven months, we alternated our weekly meetings.
One week, we met inside the ghetto for a half-day meeting and house calls to familiarise ourselves with the home circumstances of the men and have individual discussions with them, while the other week we organised a day of counselling, training and interviews at Arboretum Park. During these bi-weekly meetings at the park, the men engaged in vigorous debates and discussed at length how they could leave the gang and transform their lives. In between group discussions, training and counselling sessions, we exercised, played football and ate lunch at a nearby roadside restaurant.

**Positions of manhood: on hustlers and fools**

The information above provides some background as to why and how Motion and Cosmos approached me, Kingi and Monga to set up an outreach programme. As noted, most of the current One Touch gang members wanted and struggled to leave the gang in order to establish themselves as senior men according to popular notions of senior manhood. Working together in the programme with ex-gang members who were social workers and trainers at Safi was their way to develop collective pathways to try and leave the gang and become fully recognised as senior men. Soon, however, tensions emerged around positions of manhood during the training sessions. The trainers positioned themselves as street-smart hustlers (see also Thieme 2013), and increasingly judged the One Touch men as *mafala* ('fools' in Sheng). This was an extremely offensive term, because in the context of the gang it denoted men who lacked the masculine power to perform the street-smart hustler role, which was, to most of the men in Mathare, a vital quality when it came to becoming a senior man.

One afternoon in late November 2010, Motion, Cosmos and the other participants in the programme lay in a circle on their stomachs on the wet grass in the park. They listened attentively to Kingi, who shared with them how he had struggled to leave the One Touch gang in late 2007. What particularly seemed to resonate was the way he explained how he had felt stuck while distilling *chang’aa* seven days a week for almost nine years. “Sometimes weeks passed”, he recounted with a sad smile on his face “...before going up the cliffs to the main road and see vehicles pass by.” Some of the men murmured in recognition and agreement, and one of them said that he felt as if he were in a prison called *rowe* (‘the riverside’ in the Kikuyu language). Motion responded that it was “okay to brew for a short period to build a life”, but he also shared that he now felt like he was going nowhere as there were very few opportunities for young men like him, that is young ghetto men who lacked a proper education and connections. On hearing these words, some of the men sat up and stared hard into the distance, undoubtedly pondering the tough life they lived. Most of them woke at four in the morning to make their way to the distilling site near the river to face a day, come rain or shine, of either waiting for work or of backbreaking work that earned them no more than 30 Euro cents an hour.

Brayo broke the silence and suddenly stated vehemently: "Without a plan you are lost. Down there (the riverside in Mathare) you are locked inside. Your mind is not thinking outside." He had clearly startled the men into listening to him, as most now looked up at him in surprise. Brayo later explained that his blaze of frustration derived from his own
history of feeling imprisoned while working rowe. By using terms such as imprisoned, many of the young men seemed to largely locate the causes of their marginal position as being beyond their own making. However, Brayo later explained to me that he had experienced how easy it is to imprison yourself by "thinking there is nothing for you out there. We need to change the mentality down (of people living and working by the riverside), of what they think. So many, they think that this is the only life for them." During the training sessions, the current gang members opened up about their fear of the future and their lack of hope. Anticipating such bleak social horizons (see also Vigh 2006:30) at times triggered a sense of powerlessness among these young ghetto men. Yet, all of those I worked with adhered to the position of manhood that they referred to as “the hustler.” Kingi, Monga and Brayo, however, took their expressions of temporary powerlessness as proof that these men had already given up. Brayo exclaimed: "Yah! They (the participating One Touch gang members) have no hope, no plan, they don’t see what they can do to change, they say there is no work for them, no business outside chang’aa, and the problem is they don’t get paid enough by the bosses, that is what they say." The way Brayo phrased his comment that these young men “don’t see what they can do to change” is telling. He loathed their temporal sense of powerlessness, and deemed it to be weak and unmanly. This is because, to him, it stifled initiative, which was key to performing the role of hustler. In Brayo’s opinion, the current One Touch gang members were seizing fewer and fewer of the opportunities that were available to them. By calling them mafala ('fools' in Sheng), he positioned them as counter to the hustler, who is supposed to be street-smart and motivated to make use of available opportunities. As a consequence, opposite mafala stood wajanja in the popular discourse. This is the Sheng term for hustlers who know how to navigate difficult circumstances and sometimes even tweak situations to their own advantage. Kingi and Monga (the trainers) often engaged in vigorous debates with the One Touch men to emphasise that they, as Kingi put it during one such discussion, "need to stay alert (kukaarada in Sheng) and take opportunities" (see also Vigh 2011), whereas the gang members persistently emphasised that they had no power to change their situation because there were no opportunities. A rift between the trainers and Brayo on the one hand, and the other participants on the other, became increasingly evident during the course of this project, and led to frequent outbursts during meetings.

Most of the men in Mathare, including Brayo, Kingi and Monga, coped with feeling temporarily powerless in the face of grave predicaments. At the same time, all of the men I worked with in this ghetto were heavily engaged in enacting the hustler, including One Touch participants like Motion and Cosmos. Yet, some denounced expressions of powerlessness, while others did not consider them to be a paradox when it came to performing the hustler. It was remarkable to see how Brayo, Kingi and Monga imagined the street-smart hustler (mjanja) without expressions of temporal defeat when addressing the gang members. This served to underscore their position as trainers (Kingi and Monga) and the spearheads of the programme (Brayo), while the training itself revolved around notions of taking responsibility as a man and seizing even the slightest opportunity. To them, there were always prospects, and they equated not being able to see and seize them
with being a fool (a *fala* in Sheng) and not a hustler (a *mjanja* in Sheng). This positioning also enabled these men to distance themselves from their own past and present gang affiliations. This was not so much aimed at denying the past, but more at emphasising their current position as senior men, especially in relation to their peers. It also alluded to the imaginary of the gang space as a trap which, if it is not left on time in one's life trajectory, gradually transforms into a space of emasculation where one gradually becomes less and less manly. The *fala* position to them epitomised the 'lesser man' and so marked the boundaries of what they took to be masculine ideals (*see also* Willemse 2009: 226; Connell 1987: 184, 1995, 2000; O'Neill and Hird 2001:221).

Brayo's positioning during the training, when he distanced himself from the other participants, emanated from the history he shared with Monga and Kingi as Safi youth group members (see Chapter 1). Brayo had joined the Safi youth group in 1997, six years after Kingi and Monga. All three took part in an intensive counselling programme in 1998.¹ The Director of Safi, Dr. Karanja, emphasised in her counselling approach that everyone is fundamentally good, and that "self-destructive behaviour is caused by past hurts, distresses, that have not been properly discharged." She used drama and other art forms to encourage youths to express themselves, discover and develop their talents, and deal with past traumas. Kingi, Monga and Brayo often shared with me how being part of the Safi youth group had helped them to develop a sense of self-respect. In Kingi's words: "I learned myself in the youth group. Mama [Dr. Karanja] taught us we are good, and we are worth something, we are not just Mathare people, like so many look at us. We can do things for ourselves. She gave us that faith in ourselves." Brayo did not work for Safi at the start of the training, but gradually positioned himself as a fellow trainer, and when Kingi and Monga decided to start their own organisation in August 2013 to fully focus on gang rehabilitation programmes and peace-building initiatives, they asked him to join them.

During the implementation of the first outreach programme with the One Touch gang members, these young trainers described an incident that had been pivotal in their lives, as it had made them realise their potential. In 1998, Dr. Karanja had organised a drama recital at the All Saints Cathedral in the centre of Nairobi for 10 members of the Safi youth group. The youths had prepared a short play about the daily challenges they faced living in Nairobi's ghettos. They had performed this drama on several occasions in Mathare, and each time the audience had received it with massive applause. This had spurred Dr. Karanja on to seek other opportunities for the youths to perform the play outside the ghetto. Monga remembered, with tears in his eyes from laughing: "Ha ha when we got there, you were there Naomi, ha ha, they did not let us in." Kingi took over: "No, they thought we can't have these youth from Mathare in our church." Brayo finished: "But we performed and all the people they loved us, they wanted to be our friends and hang out with us after the service ha ha." I remembered the incident and the amount of persuading it took by Dr. Karanja to convince the youth leader at the church to allow the Safi youths to go in and showcase their drama about everyday life in Mathare. They were a hit, and it was

¹For privacy reasons, I cannot disclose the counselling method because the organisation feared that its privacy may be compromised.
the first time these young actors had experienced that people, even if after initial hesitation, looked past the stigma of being a 'slum dweller' and appreciated their talents. This confirmed to them what Dr. Karanja had been saying all along: that they were talented youths and had something valuable to offer the world. Through this and similar experiences, they had been guided by Dr. Karanja to develop not only a sense of self-worth, but also skills like interacting with people outside Mathare in order to make use of the few opportunities that were available to them. Her teaching had further shaped their notions of manhood, among which the position of the hustler remained paramount. Within their conceptualisations of the hustler, there was little room for feeling powerless. Kingi often explained that he “closed the doors in his head” because he feared that giving room to such feelings would hinder his “struggle” (kung'ang'ana in Kiswahili). The struggling hustler was always on the move, whereas expressing powerlessness was likened to standing still, and thus to giving up. This particular construction of the hustler was key to their social navigation struggles and shaped their negative appraisals of the One Touch participants during the training sessions.

Despite the harsh judgements of the trainers and Brayo, most of the other One Touch gang members continued to express feelings of powerlessness and even despair. Their specific enactments of the hustler position, as they too adhered to this position of manhood, emanated from feeling stuck in the space of the gang. Although this seemed to indicate a shared sense of “giving up”, as Kingi worded it repeatedly, it was possible to also detect agency in their positioning. For instance, locating the causes solely within the restrictive structural forces of society (no work for them), and pinpointing oppressive bosses (who did not pay enough), enabled the gang members to imagine that it was society and their bosses who had failed them instead of them failing. This allowed these men to hold on to a sense of self-respect and manhood as part of their social navigation trajectories and in relation to, at least, each other, which was crucial to their social survival. The One Touch participants never called themselves fala (singular for mafala), and took great offence whenever the trainers used this term in reference to them. The trainers nonetheless ignored their protests, and continued using the word to impress on the gang members the importance of taking matters into their own hands. This led to regular arguments during the training sessions, which I will explore further below. However, I will first delve deeper into the relationship between the position of the struggling street-smart hustler and the sense of being increasingly trapped in the gang space, which was a feeling shared by most of the gang members in Bondeni.

**Trapped in junior manhood**

As discussed above, the salience of (time and space-bound) feelings of powerlessness among many of the young men in Mathare was shaped by a shared sense of being stuck in the social position of a junior man, i.e. not a boy, but also not yet a senior man. As the gang members grew older, the social pressure to leave and establish themselves as senior men intensified. When the social and economic situation deteriorated even further in Mathare as a result of the economic crisis, the young men who participated in my research felt
increasingly hampered in terms of leaving the gang and, thus, becoming fully recognised as senior men. Their frustrations at ‘being stuck’ were further exacerbated by the way young ghetto men were described in the dominant discourse, where the ghetto boy is never a man, but always a boy, and never leads, but is always led by other more powerful and knowledgeable men. As a consequence, this label resonated to some extent with the epithet fala.

Fala is the fool who never becomes a senior man, because he gives up and therefore lacks the strength or wit to, in the words of a One Touch participant, "beat the system, so he is used by Babylon." Many young ghetto men made intertextual references to Rastafarian viewpoints and terminologies in their attempts to comprehend their own positioning. With the term Babylon, these men denoted, in line with the Rastafarian religion (e.g. Murrell 1998:6), all of the oppressive structures (varying from government to business people) that they typified as being morally corrupt, influenced by Western powers, and so inherently perverse (see the section in Chapter 4 about lesbianism for more). They often made a sign with their hand that symbolised an upside down pyramid which, to them, stood for revolution and power to the people, which was a phrase that I heard them utter repeatedly. A hustler, in this vein, was not a "slave to Babylon", as Brayo explained, but a "master of his own destiny." The local conceptualisations of the term Babylon shaped a mind-set of mental resistance to oppressive power structures (such as the police), and was just one of the mind-sets available to young men in Mathare to help them deal with daily situations of oppression. This state of mind was, however, incessantly challenged by everyday violence and the growing obstacles that young gang members faced when trying to leave the gang. Indeed, many of them did not feel like masters of their own destiny. As a consequence, some found new ways to continue to adhere to the position of the hustler while giving vent to feelings of powerlessness.

Feeling trapped referred to the tensions these gang members experienced with regard to the growing permanence of a social position that was, even if rather fluidly, delineated by biological age. As explored in Chapter 2, young men in Mathare often took up the position of gang member after completing the rite of passage of male circumcision that usually took place between the ages of 14 and 16. In this vein, gang membership had parallels with popular notions of a junior warrior. Many ethnic groups that practise male circumcision also have (notions of) a period following this rite of passage in which young men of a certain age-set become junior warriors (see also Uzoigwe 1977:36). In more recent times, many groups have stopped observing the more institutionalised rituals commonly associated with such notions of manhood, yet the concepts of a junior and senior warrior continue to shape popular masculinities nonetheless. In Mathare, for instance, the junior positions of male gang members were often counterposed to senior manhood (perhaps informed by the notion of a senior warrior – see also Uzoigwe 1977:36). Strikingly, during the years when they took up the position of a junior man, these men gradually took on responsibilities and gained the powers associated with senior manhood. This underlines present-day and local improvisations of what were popularly considered to be traditional repertoires (see also Spronk 2012). In the dominant discourse, marriage
and fatherhood are taken by most ethnic groups to be the prerogatives of only senior men, whereas they were regarded as key steps for junior men preparing for senior manhood in Mathare.

Counter-positioning junior and senior manhood also resonated with the mainstay of the dominant discourse on citizenship and masculinities in Kenya, which revolves around the simultaneous configuration of the dominant positions of men over women, and wealthy older urban men over poor younger urban men (Spronk 2012:61; Silberschmidt 2004; Barker & Ricardo 2005). Rural men feature less and less in the imaginary that is central to dominant masculinities and in the construction of citizenship, except when the ‘rural Luo boy’ as a representation of unfit leadership is evoked in political polemics (Ahlberg & Njoroge 2013; Throup & Hornsby 1998; Wa Wamwere 2003). Within the dominant discourse on citizenship and masculinities, young ghetto men are cast as ghetto boys and thugs for hire (Branch & Cheeseman 2009), and as non-citizens and figureheads in political struggles. They are considered to be only foot soldiers for criminals or opportunistic political leaders – that is wealthy, older urban men (and sometimes women – especially in Mathare). Taking great pride in becoming a father as a junior man was thus one of the ways young ghetto men negotiated this dominant discourse, as fatherhood underscored their social status as men instead of boys.

Over the past ten years, the fear of remaining as a junior man has intensified among many of the young men in Nairobi’s ghettos as a result of what one could justly call ‘gendercide’ (Willemse 2009). As discussed above, countless young men in Mathare have been shot dead by the police (see previous chapter, Alston 2009; IMLU 2011) before reaching the age of 25. Moreover, young ghetto men are not only othered as ghetto boys and non-citizens, but are also increasingly seen as a risk to society (cf. Were 2008). This demonstrates that, along with ethnicity and gender, three other key markers of subjectivation (see also Foucault 1982: 212) play a significant role in the dominant discourse on masculinities and citizenship: class, age and locality. These young ghetto men thus marked the unstable and highly contested boundaries of citizenship, national identification and belonging (see also Willemse 2009:226-227) that continue to be marked – albeit in constantly shifting ethnic configurations – by ‘Big Men.’ Within this still predominantly patriarchal system, these young men were violently exploited, oppressed and confined to the ghetto. Accordingly, the system worked to affirm the power of the political and business elites.

The shared fear of not growing older than 25, and thus never being able to achieve senior manhood, had a significant impact on the social praxis and choice-making of many gang members. Numerous young men told me that they desperately wanted to become a father in order to leave their mark (“mini-me” as they put it) before they die. This shows that social suffering was complexly gendered in Mathare. Moreover, being a police target solely because they were young men living in a Nairobi ghetto impinged heavily on the gendered sense of the self of these young men, as well as on their (temporal and context-bound) feelings of powerlessness. Kingi had lost at least 23 close friends in the span of a decade, and told me how he felt about being a young man and father in Mathare:
I think it was 2004 and also 2008, we had *mazishi* (a funeral in Kiswahili) every week. But also in 2000, yes... it started earlier. So many of us were shot dead by *karao* (*a policeman* in Sheng), so many! It is like, what?...you know him and him, and you work together *rowe* (*at the riverside* in the Kikuyu language), and the next week he is a dead. Many guys who were in my football team, also they died. I showed you the picture. From us, only five are alive... Ok, some were not innocent, but they are shot dead, not brought to court. And you saw it with Kuch, it still happens. But *roundi hii* (*this time* in Sheng) it is calm, maybe you hear one case a week, a month, maybe it is because of the new constitution. [...] All men in ghetto have been in cell, all of us, ha ha ha you are not a man if you have not been in cell. When there is a *msako* (*a police raid* in Sheng), we have to hide, they can ask you to *lala chini* (*lie face down on the ground* in Sheng), they *peremba* (*pickpocket* in Sheng) you, they take your things, and when they are not happy with what they find, they can just take you to *Centa* (a ground in Eastleigh, a neighbourhood near Mathare, where many young men have been executed) to shoot you, just like that. We are not safe, even if we are innocent, they will shoot you. They can place a fake gun on you, and put a report that you are a thief. A thief has 40 days, but what about me? How many days do I have? My son? Here in ghetto, we men live in a warzone.

Accordingly, the fear and ensuing frustrations of these men not only hinged on a lack of respect by society at large, but also on their inability to live up to the dominant standards of senior masculinity. The clear and present danger of being murdered by the police, voiced rather poignantly here by Kingi, informed a gendered sense of the self in which young men felt as if they stood clearly apart from other social groups in Mathare, such as women, girls and older men who shared the same class and ethnic positions. Kingi stated that men, not women, girls, or even older men, lived in “a warzone.” Young men from the ghetto thus felt deeply haunted, obstructed and discriminated against, and this shaped their temporal sense of powerlessness.

**Everyday drinking and giving up**

Facing seemingly insurmountable problems, many gang members battled heavy drinking and, for some, even full-blown alcohol addiction. At the end of most of the bi-weekly training days that we spent at Arboretum Park in Nairobi, Cosmos and a few other gang members shook badly as a result of the lack of alcohol in their addicted bodies. Indeed, they could hardly stand up. Cosmos reflected on his addiction as follows:

> We drink because that is what you do, at the *baze*. There are no good ideas down there, no morale, they all want to see you down, because they are down. You drink because you have no money, you can’t go
home, and you know biko ('the first strong alcohol produced in the process of distilling chang’aa,' in Sheng) is free, no money there. So you forget your problems. Even when we work we drink because they (bosses) don’t pay us enough, we only work three days a week, the rest we drink. Because there is no work.

Cosmos regarded the availability of chang’aa at the baze, in conjunction with a perpetual lack of work, as a prime cause of his addiction to alcohol. Kingi replied to him: "You, ha ha, okay so there is no work so you drink to forget the problems...You have problems because you have no work, but you don’t get work when you drink!" This evidently made Cosmos’s head spin and he looked at me with his big, misty eyes: "Naomi, do you think I would drink if there would be work?" This remark highlights how these men often included me in their exchanges. Although their positioning during these encounters was mostly directed at each other, they also often addressed me in an attempt to convince me, and perhaps themselves, that it was not their fault that they were 'stuck.' This again reveals that enacting a position of victimhood, and thus incorporating elements of the fala position such as acknowledging feelings of powerlessness in their enactment of the mjanja position, helped these men to hold onto a moral upper hand, despite the harsh verdicts of the trainers.

Distillers were certainly at high risk of becoming addicts given that they had to taste the alcohol during the distillation process to separate the strongest drink from the rest, as roughly the first five litres of distilled alcohol, known as biko (see Chapter 1), are more valuable. They also had to ensure both the quality and potency of the rest of the chang’aa. Sellers too faced a high risk of becoming addicts, as they had to prove to their customers that the drink was not poisonous and would not blind or, worse, kill them. Chang’aa is highly addictive and hazardous due to its potency; a few sips every day is probably enough to be detrimental to the body and mind. What is more, despite its already high alcohol content, chang’aa is often adulterated to enhance its impact, and may contain varying levels of the highly poisonous methanol. Yet, even without the addition of other harmful supplements to increase the potency of the drink (such as kerosene, formalin from mortuaries, ARVs from AIDS patients, and battery fluid), chang’aa is a potentially lethal beverage (see also Masime et al. 2013; Izugbara et al. 2013). Only a few gang members claimed to drink occasionally, with most doing so on a daily basis, and some had the tell-tale signs of chang’aa addiction, such as reddish and flaky skin, a swollen face, yellow and bloodshot eyes, and blistered lips. Of the 20 participants in the outreach programme, 11 were dealing with serious health problems that were all related to the excessive drinking of chang’aa, meaning more than two drinks a day. The physical and mental problems I observed throughout my fieldwork varied from large, infected open wounds that would not heal to severe psychological complaints such as insomnia, amnesia and depression.

Clearly, the use of and an addiction to alcohol and other substances had an impact on the physical and mental well-being of these men. Yet drinking, many stated, also served as an easy way to escape from their everyday problems. At the same time, these issues were considered by some, like Kingi, to be the very reason for the manifestation of these
problems. According to Kingi, the *chang’aa* was not helping these young men to develop strategies and make use of available opportunities as part of the social navigation projects on offer. Yet, drinking (excessively) was also part of the everyday encounters between these men. Cosmos stated: "We drink because that is what you do, at the *baze*, and not merely to escape harsh conditions. A former One Touch gang member, Buda, who had recently moved out of Mathare, confirmed this by claiming: "When I am back in ghetto, I have to go down and see my *mabeshte* ('friends' in Sheng), to drink. In Rome do like Romans, ha ha ha, that is what they say, ha ha ha, so that is what I do." Drinking together forged a bond between friends and fellow gang members; it was part of their homosociality (*see also* Kiesling 2005), as it induced a sense of brotherhood and togetherness.

Monga further explained to me the impact of both the ubiquity of *chang’aa* in the realm of the everyday and the routinisation (*see also* Vigh 2006: 149) of drinking in the everyday social praxis.

  Drinking in Bondeni is what you see growing up. You see it as normal, everybody drinks. For women, it is a problem, only prostitutes drink, ha ha ha, but all women in Bondeni drink...so... not all are prostitutes of course...but for men, no problem, it is part of being a man. You don’t hide. You don’t drink at home, but at a bar in company with your friends. Oh but ha ha, almost every house is a bar.

Over the years, I have visited many homes in Bondeni where at least one open 180-litre steel drum, filled with a distilling mixture (*kango* in Sheng) in various stages of fermentation, was part of the few household items on show. Other homes doubled-up as bars, and it was not uncommon to find children drinking their breakfast porridge alongside (mostly) male customers drinking their “wake-up” glass, as the first drink of *chang’aa* in the morning was jokingly dubbed by some. Being used to the habit of drinking and the widespread availability of *chang’aa* in everyday life contributed to its pervasive use among the One Touch gang members. Drinking illicit drinks (such as *chang’aa* and *busaa* – *see* Chapter 1) was widespread in Bondeni (and other ghetto villages in Mathare), and was governed by certain codes: men were not supposed to drink at home (unless it also functioned as a bar), and it was less accepted for women to drink in public. As Monga revealed, many people deviated from these codes in everyday practice, yet, when asked about the boundaries of respectability with regard to drinking, my interlocutors often evoked these and other notions of morality. Even more, these drinking habits seemed to constitute the frame of reference that people often called upon to size each other up as either *wajanja* or *mafala*.

  Drinking alcohol, especially *chang’aa*, was widely perceived to be acceptable behaviour for men in Mathare in particular, and indeed in Kenya in general (Silberschmidt 2004), even though women were just as likely to drink as men (Nelson 1978a, 1978b; White 1990). The women who sold alcohol drank the beverage to prove its safety to their customers, while the women who sold sex often drank *chang’aa* with potential clients as
part of the transaction. As one woman from Bondeni explained to me: “The men in a bar, they don’t like drinking alone, so they buy you to drink with them, then you can make a deal with them.” The gender difference with regard to how drinking practices were imagined concentrated on the way addiction in men and women was considered and disciplined. Among both sexes, addiction was deemed to be a weakness, albeit not to the same degree, as addicted women were condemned more severely in popular discourse than addicted men.

Monga shared with me why addiction in general was taken to be a weakness: "You lose control, anything can happen. You act irresponsibly, and forget everything. You know my brother was burned in his house when he was drunk. You can sleep like a dead when you drink only two glasses." The widespread condemnation of alcohol addiction largely derived from the fact that most of the families I worked with over the past two decades had either lost someone from addiction-related illnesses or from accidents caused by being drunk (such as fires). Moreover, addicted family members were notorious for hindering the social and economic progress of households by, for instance, using money that was meant for food and selling household items to support their habit. Female addicts often bore the brunt of public denunciation. In Kenya in general, and in Mathare in particular, women (more than men) who went against commonly held social norms were considered to be disrupting social relations and challenging the boundaries of popular notions of respectability (see also Hodgson & McCurdy 2001:6). Even more so, female bodies were, more than anything, inscribed with a longing for, and localised notions of, safety and homeliness (e.g. Lovesey 1992). The fact that most households in Mathare were headed by single women made women, perhaps more than anywhere else, the sole embodiment of home, safety and hope. A female addicted body thus constituted a threat to morality and social ties, and to dreams and hopes, even more than was the case for addicted male bodies. Meanwhile, addicted men were taken to be weak, but they were also regarded as potential customers. Most families survived in Bondeni by distilling, selling and smuggling alcohol, and thus depended heavily on a wide customer base. Monga spoke about the ensuing ambivalence with which most people in Mathare related to chang’aa:

I was born with chang’aa, raised by it, but I have never taken even one sip...I know it kills. You see walevi (‘drunkards’ in Kiswahili) sleeping in the middle of the road, the goats can even eat their ears, they don’t feel it, ha ha ha. I always spit it out when I brew, or when I sell. I could tell just by tasting with my fingers, whether it was biko or chang’aa, so I did not need to swallow. I am glad for chang’aa because it helped me to go to school. But it also killed my brother and so many friends. I used to live in my brother’s bar, you remember? Ha ha...it made me strong to think I would not become like the customers, those crazy, drunk men I sold chang’aa to ha ha ha. When you swallow, the next day you drink a glass, and the next day you drink two...then in a year you can die, or become crazy. I have seen this happen so many times.
Monga’s statement “I was born with chang’aa” rang true for most of the young people in Mathare, as many single mothers there worked as sex workers, selling both chang’aa and sex from their homes (see also White 1990). Monga, like many of the men I worked with, did not know who his father was and grew up helping his mother, and later his brother, at the family bar. He explained his success in leaving the gang by referring to his abstinence from alcohol. To him, this type of self-discipline constituted the core of being a street-smart hustler. Many One Touch gang members to some extent agreed that drinking excessively did not help them, but they also pointed out the multiple problems young men faced, and how drinking was sometimes a help when it came to forgetting these difficulties. Again, many claimed that they just really, really liked drinking together. Cosmos worded his experience of the different layers of everyday drinking as follows: "Ha ha, I have to see mabeshte, yah we drink. It's not bad. Also, nightmares chase me at day, I can't sleep without drinking, I scream aloud, problems make me to drink." He identified friendship, a lack of work, and ensuing problems and severe anxieties as reasons to drink. Cosmos continued to drink heavily but, encouraged by the training, shaved off his rough looking beard and shaggy hair and applied for a job as a security guard in the city centre. To his amazement, he was hired, and at the time of writing this chapter had been working in this role for over two years, while also balancing his drinking with his friends from the One Touch gang. He still suffered from frightening nightmares, but was less worried about the future. He commented in February 2013:

It is God, somehow I thought to go to get this job. After job I go down to drink, to see my friends, to have fun. I make sure I don't go to job when I am drunk. I don't want the boss to smell alcohol on me. I can't stop drinking, I don't want to. It is what I do with my friends. It is not a problem to me. I always eat when I drink.

Cosmos’s narrations show that drinking for men was not considered to be a problem per se. What is more, drinking heavily was regarded as hard core ('hard ghetto living' in Sheng) and could therefore be part of performing the hustler. Many marked the distinction between ufala (foolishness) and ujanja (street smartness) with respect to drinking practices as the difference between whether one had eaten before drinking, and whether the drinking interfered with 'chasing money.' Graffiti on an iron sheet wall of a house near the distilling site underlined this, stating: “Eat Before Drinking, Don’t Drink Before Eating.”

Social horizon and living in the now
"Wasee wa rowe ('men from the riverside' in Sheng) think of today, ha ha only today. I think of tomorrow, that is my focus." By using the word focus, Kingi thus captured the constant striving to not only survive today, but to also procure an income and a better social position tomorrow (preferably outside chang’aa and, accordingly, the gang). Brayo also alluded above to the significance of having a focus, or planning ahead, when he said:
"Without a plan we are lost." Many young gang members seemed to grapple with social horizons that, often, did not appear to reach beyond the space of the baze and the span of today. Tomorrow was perhaps just too frightening to think about. Consequently, many of the One Touch gang members also had a focus, except theirs did not seem to extend very far into the future. This, according to Kingi, Monga and Brayo, had a negative bearing on their social position and exacerbated risk-taking behaviour among them.

During a private conversation with me, Brayo expounded how he was often reminded of the time when he had lacked focus: "Nilikua fala (‘I was a fool' in Sheng). I know to live only for today, and it did not help me. I was warned by a bullet." He was talking about 1998, when he had just joined Safi. One Sunday in July of that year, he had been caught stealing at a football match by the police, who shot at him and his accomplices (including Monga and Buda) as they were trying to remove a floodlight from the stands. Luckily, the crowd had dispersed instead of dropping to the ground, allowing him and his friends to run for cover among the bolting spectators. Yet, one bullet had caught his side, but he could not visit a hospital as they would have to hand him over to the police, as all bullet wounds had to be reported to the relevant authorities. A trained nurse and a friend from Bondeni removed the bullet and took care of the wound, but for weeks it remained angry and raw and Brayo suffered several infections. When Monga and I learned that he was cleaning his wound with chang’aa, we immediately bought him a medical kit. Nevertheless, it took him months to recover and in some ways he never did. The trauma of not just being shot, but also losing his ability to take care of himself, as he was bedridden for some time, was etched on his brain. Fear had grabbed hold of him. He explained to me that it had made him contemplate the possibilities of a tomorrow, instead of just being geared towards day-to-day survival, as had been common among him and his friends. Previously, the deep insecurity of tomorrow had, according to Brayo, caused him to only focus on today. Yet, only thinking of today had led to him almost "losing tomorrow", as he put it, as it had driven him to take exceptional risks. This became the bedrock upon which he appraised his peers during the outreach programme, and explains why he was so set on changing their alleged ‘living in the now’ mentality.

In offering the outreach programme, Kingi, Monga and Brayo stated that their aim was to counter the maxim ‘leo ni leo, kesho ni baadaye’ (‘today is today and tomorrow is later' in Kiswahili) which, according to them, guided the social praxis of many of the gang members in their everyday lives. Kingi often said during our meetings at Arboretum Park: "Without hope you die", which is a poignantly warranted proclamation when the volatility of and sheer poverty in Mathare is considered. The correlation between excessive drinking and lacking a focus stood at the core of their conceptualisation of the fala, or the fool. To them, losing focus seemed to be on a par with giving in to the position of the fool, and this was enacted by excessive drinking. Alcohol addiction was thus considered to be a weakness, mainly because it traversed their struggle and hindered them in considering the possibilities of a (better) tomorrow. They repeatedly exclaimed that drinking excessively was an obstacle for young gang members who wanted to move beyond the space of the gang. Addiction was thus taken by them to be a symbolic expression of giving-up hope,
which was, to Kingi, equal to suicide: "Giving up is not part of life, it is part of death. You remember Jimo? When he asked you for money when his brother died? He had to take the body to ocha (‘the rural area’ in Sheng). [...] He became crazy of cham (‘chang’aa in Sheng) because he gave up, then he dies."

Listening to the trainers and Brayo talk about the problems associated with 'thinking only of today', most participants nodded their heads and spoke in concurrence. During one afternoon session, Motion shared that compared to the other distilling gangs, the One Touch had become infamous for its drunkards. He confessed that he drank a lot himself, and that it did not help him. The group of men laughed at this and made jokes in agreement. One of them stood up and mimicked a drunkard in the middle of our circle to the great delight of the others. Motion, shouting now to be heard above the laughter, continued to explain that, as a result, this gang was considered to be occupying a lower social position than the other distilling groups in Bondeni. Brayo interjected, still with a smile on his face and laughter in his voice, that this was underlined by the Manoki bar owners (who worked with the One Touch gang), who paid less than the bar owners who worked with other gangs (a difference that could be up to 20 Kenyan Shillings – approx. 0.20 Euros per working hour). Yet, the number of non-gang members at the One Touch baze surpassed that of other bazes, as the former was locally configured as a space for kuraha (‘having fun’ in Sheng). "At One Touch, they are livest (‘prone to enjoy life’ in Sheng), they want kuraha." By referring to the One Touch gang as 'they', Brayo was showing that he, for that moment, had distanced himself from his gang. Motion replied and faced me: "It is true, we think of today, but he (Brayo) does not understand... he does not brew, without work, you can’t think more than today... If there is work... yah... you can think of tomorrow." Motion confirmed Brayo's separate position, but absolutely disagreed with the way he cast all of the other gang members as drunkards who concentrated on day-to-day survival and were thus mafala. This again shows how they included me in their conversations in order to explain why different circumstances compelled them to imagine the mjanja position differently from the trainers.

Despite the challenging remarks made by the trainers, I observed that many One Touch gang members did in fact plan ahead, even when work was erratic and income patchy. Indeed, without doing so, they would not have been able to rent houses, pay school fees for children and organise the brokering of stolen goods, as this needed intricate networks of sellers and buyers to be maintained. Furthermore, the majority of the gang members were not heavily addicted to chang’aa, despite their everyday heavy drinking practices. Indeed, they often worked 18 hours a day, which required a lot of physical strength, very specific skills and a high level of mental alertness. Motion later told me in private that the only reason he thought Kingi, Monga and, to some extent, Brayo were ahead of him and the others was linked to their connections with Safi, through which they had received training, loans and other kinds of help. "Kingi and Monga, ha ha, they are spoiled, they now work for Safi, so... they don’t have to wait for work." Kingi and Monga did not in fact get paid much by Safi and still required their own businesses to make ends meet. Nonetheless, Motion saw their experiences with, and employment by, Safi as the defining
difference between these men and the current One Touch gang members. However, one aspect of the harsh judgements of the trainers seemed to correspond with the expectations of most of the participants: many did not see a future outside the alcohol industry, whereas this was the main objective of the outreach programme.

Evaluating the programme
The outreach programme was carried out over a period of six months, after which it had grown to encompass three groups of gang members from different chang’aa gangs and one group of female sex workers. From the first group, Cosmos and four other men had been able to leave the gang as a result of the programme. Meanwhile, Motion and the other 14 participants continued their work near the riverside, but were still part of a second group of One Touch gang members who participated in the programme. Motion had failed the first group, because he had lacked a national identity card and could not therefore qualify for a loan; the others who had failed had used their loans for emergencies, such as a fire, a hospital bill and a bribe to avoid a jail sentence. As a result, their micro-businesses had gone bust and they had been unable to repay their loans. All of the participants had faced such emergencies, and only a few had refrained from using their loans to pay for them. Interviews with the participants revealed that the few who did not use their loans for emergencies positioned themselves – mostly – as wajanja in a similar way to the trainers. They missed the back-up of family connections and NGOs, yet they also completely downplayed their feelings of powerlessness, not just in the context of the training, but also in private meetings with me. Mato said:

> Yes, my daughter she is sick, very sick, you know that, so I took her to hosí (‘hospital’ in Sheng), but no I did not use the loan. I need a second loan. I thought, what if I did not have this loan? This business? What would I do? How would I pay for the hospital bills? So I took some money from a friend, and I have to pay him back. But I can make my business, so I can pay him back.

Mato was adamant about making his clothes business thrive, and he had therefore decided not to use the loan to cover the bills. He had not, however, borrowed the money from a friend, but had earned it by smuggling alcohol and brokering stolen goods. He did not tell me this, because he wanted me to believe that he had stopped these highly risky endeavours. As noted above, all of the participants engaged in such activities, dubbed by them as hustling, and so had multiple sources of income in addition to working the drums and setting up their small businesses, however small the returns of these undertakings sometimes were. The others could also have sourced the funds to pay for emergencies from elsewhere, just like Mato. Yet, many told me during the evaluation stage of the programme that they did not think they could change their situation by setting up a business, and this perhaps had made it a little easier for them to use the loan to pay for emergencies. Motion said: "Who is going to buy from me? Maybe if I have a bar. That is the only way." This shows
the ambivalence that most young men felt with regard to developing different pathways out of the gang.

There were several examples of former gang members who had left the gang via micro-businesses. Indeed, that is why Motion and Cosmos approached me to set up the outreach programme. Nevertheless, there were also other former gang members who had been able to leave the gang by setting up their own bars and building from there. In fact, Kingi was a prime example of this, as will become clear below. Most participants continued to envisage this route, despite waning profits, high risk and their wish to set up their own micro-business outside gang structures. They, as Motion brought out, did not think people would buy anything else from them than alcohol. These participants did affirm the *mjanja* position but, as stated, incorporated elements the trainers deemed to be *ufala*, such as foregrounding temporal feelings of powerlessness. The specific sense of powerlessness expressed by Motion and many others during our private interviews seemed to affirm the popular idea that these men were not considered to fully belong to the community, and would thus not be expected to do anything other than work in the alcohol industry (I will return to this in Chapter 5). This, to some extent, shows that the way the participants negotiated dominant discourses on manhood and positioned themselves shaped different vistas and, accordingly, different decision-making processes among the programme’s participants. As a consequence, wanting to develop a micro-business that was separate from the gang, and actually believing that this would help them to leave, were considered to be two very different things by most.

Kingi and Monga eventually resigned from Safi and set up their own community-based organisation (CBO) with Brayo, which focused solely on gang rehabilitation and outreach based on the design of the first outreach programme. I have helped them to raise funds that enabled them to make this move. At the time of writing this chapter, both Kingi and Monga lived outside Mathare, Brayo had moved into a stone room in Upper Bondeni and all three had a second-hand iPhone. They were thus moving up, and the five graduates from the first programme group had also been able to improve their living conditions. Cosmos, for instance, was preparing to move out of Mathare at the time of writing this chapter, and Mato had opened a second-hand clothes stall at a market nearby. The CBO that was founded by Kingi, Monga and Brayo was geared towards helping other gang members to follow these examples. Nevertheless, the journey to senior manhood was long and hard for most of these men, and some would never reach this social position because they either died from a police bullet or succumbed to alcohol addiction. However, even if a gang member had been able to leave the gang by gaining some form of social and economic independence, the struggle to become and establish oneself as a senior man, and to be recognised as such by the wider community, continued nonetheless.

**A successful trajectory**

As discussed above, Kingi has succeeded not only in leaving the gang he had once founded and setting up his own organisation, but also in being a husband and father for over 17 years. Indeed, he has established himself as the head of his household and of his extended
family, which has included his family-in-law, over the course of the past few years. He was thus widely recognised as a senior man. However, he still struggled every day to adhere to the ideals commonly associated with this position, revealing that the process of becoming a senior man never ended. So, what made his trajectory very different from those of the majority of gang members in Mathare who struggled to leave and felt stuck? A closer look at his and his wife’s biographical narratives and life trajectories will help us to unearth why Kingi’s (long and rocky) pathway out of the gang was eventually successful. It should also reveal something about the difficulties other young gang members faced in attempting to follow suit in recent times.

Kingi had founded the One Touch gang in early 1994 and left the group in late 2007. At the time Kingi founded the gang, chang’aa had been in high demand and police bribes and competition were relatively low (compared to more recent times). Accordingly, it was possible to save, little by little, and invest in small businesses on the side. Chang’aa was still in high demand in 2010, but police bribes had become very high and competition had grown fierce. Moreover, the cost of the ingredients required to make the mixture had risen steeply over the past decade, whereas the price of a glass had stayed the same. The continuous slump in the purchasing power of the Kenyan Shilling (e.g. Fengler 2011) and the stagnation of earnings among low-income families led to a price freeze for one glass of chang’aa in Nairobi’s ghettos. This made it increasingly difficult for gang members to save and invest in the chang’aa industry as a step towards a business outside chang’aa. Kingi was roughly five years older than most of the gang members-cum-programme participants (although three were older than Kingi). As a consequence, he had been able to start developing micro-businesses between 1998 and 2004, which was a time of relative growth in the chang’aa industry. Yet, his age and the fact that he had been able to profit, however minimally, from the chang’aa boom in the late 1990s do not explain everything about Kingi’s story. Monga was closer to the age of the majority of the gang’s current members, and yet he left the group in 2005, which was before Kingi took the same step. Motion brought this out in the discussions examined above when he deemed Monga, Kingi and Brayo to be different from him and the other One Touch gang members because of their connection to Safi. As noted, these men developed skills and a sense of self-esteem, and had been able to access loans through this NGO. I will therefore now take a closer look at Kingi’s narratives in order to highlight both how this NGO has helped him and the other factors that have played a role in his success.

Kingi almost always smiled, but this hid a turbulent and violent past from which the mental scars continued to plague him. Similar to most young men in Mathare, Kingi grew up without knowing who his father was. As a young boy, at barely seven years old, he was physically and emotionally abused by his mother and often slept outside the house to avoid her. At one point, he ran away and lived with his grandmother, Shosho Kingi, during the latter part of his troubled childhood. His grandmother had moved to Mathare in 1968 after divorcing her wealthy husband for reasons still unknown to Kingi:
I am changing the pattern, you see my mother she is a single woman now, my grandmother she is a single mother. All my aunties, they are all single, but one. I don’t know why Shosho left her husband. Her husband was a rich, very wealthy, a sonko (a wealthy person or a boss in Sheng). He is a family of Charles Njonjo (an influential politician during the Kenyatta era). He has land in Kangemi, and in Ngong. We are royalty living in ghetto. But we don’t know why. We could have been rich, and have a different life ha ha ha. We don’t know why Shosho left her husband and come to Mathare to brew chang’aa...can you imagine from that life to here?...You talk to Shosho, maybe she can tell you but it is a secret. I want to know because it is the reason why all my family, they are a single mothers, and poor. And have children from many fathers, also my sister, she is repeating the pattern. My mother was very beautiful and proud when she was young. I think Shiko (Kingi’s daughter) has that from her. I want my family to be different, I want to break the pattern and be a father. I stay with my wife, my children have a better future. All these people down there (near the river in Bondeni), they think marriage mara hiyo hiyo (‘instantly’ in Sheng) when they love someone, but when love goes, they leave babies behind, they don’t stay and these women they have to find other husbands to take care of them. But men cannot take care of another man’s baby, like what happened to me. I did not know my stepfather was not my father, but he did not treat me the same, my mother blamed me when he left her, she never liked me, and now she asks me for money and to buy her things ha ha ha. Also my sister, she asks. But she spends money badly. She does not pay rent but when she has money she buys a new TV. She goes through my mother so I give her. They abuse me. Without them I would be far now, very far. When Victa was born Shosho helped me, my mother did not come for weeks. My mother and I, we still don’t have a good relationship. She never told me my father, it was my auntie, you were there, in 2005, how...how! Then I find out he is a known man in ghetto, and I have brothers and sisters...ha ha ha I could have married my sister. How...my mother did not tell me. My dream is to move away from ghetto and give my children a different life. You see how Shiko, she does not even remember we lived in a mabati (‘iron sheet’ in Kiswahili) house, and we only ate uji (‘gruel or porridge made with water’ in Kiswahili). Victa remembers, but Shiko she thinks we are a rich. Ha ha ha. For Jamal (his new born son), he will have a new life, he is a prince now, he even eats fruits!

Besides love, Kingi’s resolve to marry his wife and recognise his first-born son, even though they had just started dating, was induced by his wish to break ‘the pattern’ of his own family. The moment he learned his girlfriend was pregnant (not because she told him, but
because she started showing), he decided to marry her and leave the Safi youth group and the other activities he was involved with (such as break-dancing in a club in the city centre). Instead, he started distilling alcohol seven days a week as a leader of the One Touch gang in order to provide for his young family, and as such he became the father he never had.

Kingi sometimes expressed regret that he had been so utterly unprepared for fatherhood. When Mama J and Victa moved in with him, he lived in a room with an earthen floor that was half the size of a normal one-room house in Mathare, as the structure was subdivided by thin cardboard. His only possessions were a few clothes, a single woodworm-infested bed and a few second-hand items of bedding. He did not even have a stove or cooking utensils. Despite his unpreparedness, he told me he had been adamant about the way forward, and that the memories of his violent childhood had helped him to make the decision to marry his girlfriend. "I know I can do it. So many told my wife, don’t marry him, he will not go anywhere. He is from [the riverside]. It makes me angry, also today, but I know when they say that, I can do it."

Kingi’s self-awareness derived from his experiences as a youth leader and later as a gang leader, and was further shaped by his relentless faith in his abilities. Shosho had been a frontrunner of a women's cooperative that was connected to Safi during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and she had introduced Kingi to the youth group when he was just 12 (see also chapters 1 and 2). This group trained him and the other members in leadership skills, drama and dancing. Kingi discovered that he had talent and that people took him seriously when he spoke, and he developed a profound sense of self-respect as a result. The Director of Safi, Dr. Karanja, also counselled him, and this helped him to deal with some of his childhood traumas. On the whole, he grew into a self-assured man, despite his young age and troubled childhood. In his words: “I know myself. I struggle to keep a decision, it is my attitude. No fear there. Just to focus. Ha ha ha, just to struggle, I am used, and I never give up.” When his girlfriend started to show that she was pregnant, he did not hesitate, and rose up to meet the occasion because he believed he could make it work. I talked to him in 1998 right after he had become a father and a husband, and he shared with me how he missed his “old life”, but he felt proud of himself that he was able to work hard and provide his young family with food. This again highlights the importance of fatherhood to men like Kingi, and his experiences with Safi had helped him to take up this position and counteract the lack of faith and support from his mother, his girlfriend’s family and neighbours.

**A ghetto marriage: 'come we stay'**
Kingi met his wife Mama J in 1996 when he was distilling alcohol for Shosho and other bosses at the One Touch site. She was 15 and he was 19. She came from the upper half of Bondeni, and her mother, neighbours and older sisters strongly advised her against dating a man from 'down' the riverside (*rowe* in the Kikuyu language). Mama J came from an all-female household that shared a one-room iron sheet house close to Juja Road. Her mother worked as a sex worker from her house, and she had six daughters from five different fathers. Mama J and the other sisters who were old enough helped their mother by selling
chang’aa from a small bar. This bar was adjacent to the room where her mother received her “husbands”, as Mama J euphemistically called her mother’s customers. Her mother worked in the same room in which they all lived and slept, and Mama J vividly remembered that her mother often had to work while her younger sisters were sleeping on the floor beside the bed. She laughed when she recalled how her mother even sometimes gave orders to them from the bed while she was working by pulling open the thin curtain that hid the bed from sight to show her face. Obviously, all six daughters knew exactly the line of work their mother was involved in, but unlike most women in the ghetto Mama J’s mother did not try to hide it. On the contrary, she engaged in open discussion with her daughters to encourage them to make different choices in their lives. Besides selling chang’aa at the family bar, Mama J also supplemented the family income by hawking clothes in bars in the city centre at night. Older women from the ghetto who were doing the same usually accompanied her. These women, she recounted, protected her from the sex work that often went along with hawking, as she was considered to be too young. She started hawking when she was 12 years old, yet she was very tall and beautiful and attracted a lot of attention from men while going in and out of the city’s bars at night to sell the garments she herself had made. Her mother wanted her to escape their poor and hard life by marrying a wealthy man, and Kingi, a gang member without an education and influential (family) connections outside the chang’aa industry, did not qualify. Yet, Mama J became pregnant soon after she started dating Kingi, and encouraged by love agreed to marry him against the wishes of her mother.

She gave birth to Victa on 30 November 1997, when she had just turned 16. Fearful of her mother’s disapproval, she did not initially tell her that she intended to move down to Kingi’s one-room iron sheet house. On the day she came home from the hospital, she waited eagerly for Kingi to pick her up. Her mother sensed something and initiated a name-calling ceremony on the spot to claim the child and deny Kingi his fatherhood. However, a sympathetic older sister alerted Kingi, who rushed up the cliffs that separated Upper Bondeni from down to whisk away his wife and baby before the ceremony kicked off properly. Mama J reminisced: “That is when we marry, first it is between me and my husband. I move in, that is like a marriage.” In local conceptualisation in Mathare (and in other Nairobi ghettos), moving into a man’s house as a woman equated marriage, yet in general certain formalities to strengthen the union between husband and wife were observed in due course. This type of marriage was initially referred to as ‘come we stay’ (e.g. Frederiksen 2000:216), denoting a couple living together, and most of the time this arrangement would gradually be transformed into a marriage through specific ceremonies. This mode of organising a marriage was quite common among people who were born and raised in Nairobi ghettos, and it involved relatively little money. This marriage practice was partly shaped by the abject poverty that hampered many ghetto residents in terms of observing the more elaborate marriage ceremonies that are common among most ethnic groups in Kenya (often involving sums of money above 3000 Euros). Moreover, second and third generation residents in the urban area, especially poor families, often lacked (strong) ties to rural families. In general, rural families were considered to have more access to
resources such as land and cattle than urban (ghetto) residents, enabling them to carry out some of the more complex rituals that often involve transactions with a number of goats and cows. Similar to the male circumcision rites discussed in Chapter 2, marriage ceremonies were not set in stone, but varied immensely according to the ethnic group, social class, and urban and rural setting. These practices were ever-shifting, not just to fit new and ever-changing social dynamics and settings, but also new belief systems. Accordingly, people improvised with such practices to suit local contexts and popular perspectives and values (see also Spronk 2012:8/79; Frederiksen 2000; Hetherington 2001; for a study on changes in brides’ wealth practices in South Africa see: Posel et al. 2011). Mama J shared with me:

Marriage is expensive, we can’t do that in ghetto, we don’t have ocha (‘rural land’ or a ‘home’ in the rural area in Sheng), it is unfair, we can use that money for business. But we pay also for ‘come we stay’, to make it like a marriage, a ghetto marriage ha ha, but not at once, we pay in years, and we don’t pay that much.

Mama J further explained that certain formalities, such as paying the ‘bride’s wealth’, could gradually transform an initial come we stay set-up into a formally recognised marriage in the years that followed (“to make it like a marriage”). Interestingly, the come we stay arrangement, which is a couple deciding to start living together without a formal consultation with elder family members, was almost always taken as the first step in the popular marriage praxis. In fact, all of the couples that I came across who lived and had children together perceived themselves, and were formally considered by their families, to be married. Sometimes, the come we stay set-up had achieved a more permanent mode among them as a result of a lack of funds to pay for the necessary ceremonies, such as a bride’s wealth. The act of living and caring for children together was commonly taken as a marriage. It also made it easier for couples to get divorced, as fewer people (that is family members from both sides) had been involved in arranging the union in the first place. Accordingly, the more permanent come we stay arrangements – without further ceremonies to bind the families of the two partners more strongly together – were considered to be less secure (Frederiksen 2000:216). In this vein, Mama J stated that the main criterion people in Mathare appropriated in order to qualify a come we stay living arrangement as a marriage was the position of the man with respect to the woman’s family. In most cases, the man uttered to his girlfriend’s family his intent to follow the required ceremonies when the couple started to live together. This was taken by the family as a sign of commitment, and the man was therefore generally recognised as the woman’s husband and the father of her children. However, this recognition would become more solid after the first payments of the bride’s wealth had been made. Mama J told me that Kingi had been set on formalising their come we stay arrangement from the beginning, and had started saving money the moment he had discovered she was pregnant. “I was so scared because I
thought he would jump (*kuruka*, 'jump' in Kiswahili and 'leave' in Sheng), but he accepted me and my *ball* ('pregnancy' in Sheng), and when I moved down we married."

Kingi visited his mother-in-law with a few male relatives and friends a year or so after his first son was born to inform her officially that he had taken her daughter as his wife. He had waited a long time before initiating this visit in order to save enough money to provide food and drinks for the occasion, and to also present his mother-in-law with a monetary symbol of his commitment to his wife and her family. During a second visit, he promised to pay the bride’s wealth that was agreed upon, which he did in small instalments as time went by. The bride’s wealth in the come we stay marriages (or, as Mama J also put it, “ghetto marriages”) in Mathare that I came across always approximated a figure of 30,000 Kenyan Shillings (about 300 Euros). This was, however, exclusive of additional financial demands from the family-in-law (such as school fees for younger siblings) that in many cases also became the responsibility of the new husband, especially in the absence of a father-in-law. The bride’s wealth in come we stay marriages thus constituted only 10 per cent of what was common in most marital ceremonies in Kenya. Moreover, in this type of marriage praxis, most men were granted more leeway to spread out payment of the instalments required to pay off the bride’s wealth over long periods of time. Kingi’s mother-in-law unfortunately died of cancer and AIDS-related illnesses in 2010, but her death did not absolve him of the debt he had to his family-in-law, as he continued to pay the bride’s wealth to Mama J’s grandmother.

When Mama J’s mother died, another debt was transferred to Mama J and her sisters. Her mother had never been married, and following localised notions of Kikuyu practice, Mama J explained that she, due to her mother’s lack of a husband, had to pay her own bride’s wealth to her own mother. Mama J clarified: “We call it *Kamweretho* (in the Kikuyu language). It is like you marry yourself. You visit your parents and give them a dowry (‘bride’s wealth’ in Kenyan English); it is like an honour to them. But also you can’t accept dowry from your daughters if you have not paid dowry to your parents. It is bad luck.” Consequently, her mother could only accept Kingi’s instalments because Mama J was paying her own bride’s wealth to her mother. When Mama J’s mother died, the unpaid part of her bride’s wealth was thus left for her and her sisters to pay off to their ageing grandmother.

Another reason for them to continue paying off this debt was tied to land that Mama J’s mother was supposed to inherit from her mother. This was land that Mama J and her sisters could then inherit from their mother. Mama J’s grandmother had been a sex worker in Mathare during the early 1960s. In 1964, President Kenyatta had launched a land scheme for, mainly Kikuyu, urban and rural squatters (*cf.* Huchzermeyer 2007:722; Anderson & Lochery 2008). Mama J’s grandmother had acquired a large piece of land through this scheme on the slopes of the Aberdare mountain range, and had promised to divide it among her daughters, as she did not have any sons. To access this land, the unmarried daughters (like Mama J’s mother) had to honour their mother through *Kamweretho* and pay off the debt. Mama J could thus not access the land that she and her sisters were supposed to inherit from their deceased mother if they did not pay off her
mother's debt. Furthermore, Kingi had to continue paying off his debt to Mama J's grandmother. It had thus become a deeply complex situation for both Kingi and Mama J when the latter's mother passed away.

I accompanied them on a visit to Mama J’s grandmother in August 2010, which was two months after Mama J’s mother had died. The visiting group also included Mama J, two of her sisters, all of their children and Kingi. It was like a holiday for the children, as they rarely ventured outside the ghetto, let alone spent much time in the rural area. Hiking in woodlands and on ridges, taking care of animals and sleeping on an earthen floor were all part of a great adventure to them. The two younger sisters, however, enjoyed it much less, and complained constantly about the persistent cold (it hailed and rained continuously), the lack of electricity (no TV or radio and no mobile phone connection), and the mud that managed to cling in big chunks to our shoes, clothes and even hair. It was winter and, high up in the mountains, it was below zero degrees Celsius during the night-time. Mama J’s sisters left the following day without accomplishing what they had come for. Mama J, however, stayed behind with Kingi, her children and me. She still wanted to discuss with her grandmother whether, even before finishing the bride’s wealth payments, they could be allowed to start growing crops on the idle piece of land they were supposed to inherit. The grandmother outright refused, and Mama J could not understand why. Later, they heard via another relative that there was an ongoing tussle between two aunts, because one wanted to deny Mama J and her sisters the land, whereas the other defended their right to inherit it. The grandmother’s refusal thus emanated from a wish to avoid taking sides. This tussle is continuing today. Mama J’s grandmother unfortunately also passed away in 2013. Mama J told me that both debts (her mother's and Kingi's) had been transferred to a few male uncles and cousins, but these were relatives she hardly knew. Mama J was thus left even more confused, and the whole family ended up in court, because the unpaid bride’s wealth had become the argument used by her family to deny Mama J and her sisters the piece of land that they, to their knowledge, were supposed to inherit from their mother and grandmother. The court case was still going on at the time of writing this chapter.

Kingi and Mama J’s complex trajectory into marriage and the way the bride's wealth became part of a family conflict is not uncommon. Most married couples I encountered in Mathare were struggling with similar tensions. They often reflected on the greed of family members (both their own and their in-laws) and the way this practice was frequently manipulated for personal gain. Sometimes, these frictions even led to a couple’s divorce. Kingi reflected: "For Shiko (his daughter), I don't want dowry. I don’t want to do like our parents, that I depend on them (his children). No. It is not fair. I am happy when they have their own life, happy. And that they can build a life. I would be so far without my family." His wife saw this in a slightly different light: "It is a sign of respect. Kingi gives me respect by paying my mother dowry. When Shiko gets married, I must get dowry." To Mama J, the fact that Kingi had "visited her mother" (as she put it) gave her a sense of security that he would stay with her. Even though both contributed financially to the household, Kingi was the main breadwinner. Accordingly, Mama J’s own experiences informed the way she
viewed the issue of bride's wealth in relation to her daughter, although this might be different if Shiko becomes able to provide for herself. In the meantime, the discussion continues between the couple.

**Navigating a 'ghetto marriage' during crises**

The section above shows the difficulties that young couples in Mathare have to face when starting to live together, yet teen pregnancy and family demands and conflicts were but a few of the challenges Kingi and Mama J navigated during their early years together. The first year of their marriage was riddled with disasters. Three weeks after Victa was born, Kingi was arrested on bogus charges by a police officer who was being bribed by the real perpetrator to frame someone else. Kingi just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mama J had to use all of their savings, and even ask for additional money from Kingi's grandmother, to bribe local policemen to secure his release. Then, he became almost terminally ill with typhoid, a disease he had probably picked up in the police cell, and had to stay in hospital for weeks on end, adding another burden to the already financially and emotionally constrained young family. Indeed, it took them both months to recover physically, psychologically and economically from these two very traumatic episodes.

Mama J was equally set on continuing their marriage, though, and this helped them both considerably through such quandaries. Like Kingi, Mama J also came from a family of two generations of single mothers and sex workers, and was just as passionate about 'changing the pattern', but the odds were against the young couple. Indeed, they were so much in debt that they could hardly afford food, and each day agreed to go their separate ways to look for something to eat. As well as visiting family members strategically around lunchtime, Mama J would sometimes go to small roadside restaurants far away from their ghetto village and leave without paying. In doing so, she accepted the risk of getting a beating from the proprietors that often followed, but knew that she needed nutritious food to nurse her baby. Kingi survived by eating once every two days at his grandmother's house. When the debts to the hospital and his grandmother were finally paid off, Kingi continued with a stringent financial regime in order to save money until he had enough to distil his own illegal alcohol. Mama J began selling this from their small house, and even if daily survival was still an uphill battle, they could now afford food and even a few clothes for Victa.

Despite their young age, Kingi and Mama J persisted with pooling their minds, bodies and other resources to counter the adversities that people inevitably meet living inside Mathare. Their determination was wrought by the hardship they had both endured while growing up; this had laid the foundation for a partnership between a husband and wife that I have seldom witnessed in the ghetto (or anywhere else). Kingi felt acute pain about not knowing his father or maternal grandfather, and about the thought that he would have lived another, wealthier, life had he known them and had they recognised him. This gave him the focus, which was a word he used often, to become the father of his son. However, becoming a father proved to be a ceaseless process, and he held onto a specific
social horizon, which was a vision he himself had constructed: he saw himself as a father to his son, living at home with his wife and child. He stated: “I have to keep that picture in my head, see it there, now and in the future, so I keep focus, (kuka rada, ‘to stay alert’ in Sheng) without focus you lose hope, and without hope you die.” Apart from his ageing grandmother, Kingi had no one to fall back on and, to him, losing focus portended death. His fear of death caused him to fight and invest all of his energy and other resources in creating a more stable situation for himself and his family. Being a gang member helped him to live by this image, provide for his family and stay true to his deeply felt desire to be the father of his children. If he had not joined the alcohol gang full-time, he would, in his own words, “have probably died before even becoming a father.” He ended our conversation by saying: ”Victa’s birth was a new birth for me because I became focused and worked hard. One Touch helped me to get work and work so hard I can earn my money. [...] I also knew this is not my life. I don't want this for my son. I have to stop distilling.” Kingi’s words show that fatherhood is often conceptualised by young men as a ‘new birth’, because to them it was a firm step towards senior manhood. They also reveal the ambiguous attitude that most men had with regard to the working gang, which was shaped by the social pressures to leave this group on time.

**Why Kingi was able to leave the gang**

Kingi was only able to leave the gang after balancing multiple jobs and businesses for nine long years. He distilled chang’aa in the afternoon, sold chicken in the morning and managed the roadside restaurant he and his wife had in the evening so that she could take care of their children. He went back and forth between the gang and these other ventures until he was financially secure enough to leave the gang for good. He normally worked from five in the morning until 11 at night, and on Sunday, his only day off, he volunteered at the Safi youth group. At the close of 2007, he had finally saved enough to stop distilling chang’aa and concentrate fully on the other businesses. At the same time, Safi had recognised his dedication and skills, and hired him as a youth group coordinator. He continued working 18 hours a day for seven days a week, because Safi did not pay enough and he still needed the earnings from the restaurant, but he never went back to chang’aa.

Kingi’s narrative and life trajectory provide a glimpse of how hard it is for young men to actually leave the gang, and how crucial a good partnership between husband and wife is. It also shows the sheer dedication and perseverance it took for Kingi and his wife to build several micro-businesses (including a home bar) with the money he earned from distilling and smuggling chang’aa. Yet, when it comes to commitment, Kingi can hardly be called an exception. The excerpts of discussions between participants in the outreach programme above show that if work was available all of the chang’aa distillers worked hard, although, as noted elsewhere, this type of work had been on the decline. It is not a coincidence, however, that both Kingi and Monga succeeded in leaving the gang and were, eventually, employed by Safi as coordinators and trainers. Moreover, Brayo’s positioning as a mjanja, and the way he separated himself from his fellow gang members throughout the first training period, alludes to the crucial role Safi played in his life. This is underscored by
the fact that he joined Kingi and Monga when they started their own organisation. These men had been trained and counselled by Safi from being young, and so had acquired skills, self-esteem and contacts that had helped them to successfully navigate the stringent rules set by this and other loan programmes. Motion, in the sections above, referred to these skills, self-image and contacts as ideas when he said to me: "We lack ideas." Motion had initiated the outreach programme because he had observed the successful trajectories of the trainers, and saw how hard it was for him and his fellow gang members to develop a micro-business without additional loans, skills-sets and guidance.

Along with his connection with Safi, being a grandson of a well-established bar owner had also helped Kingi to leave the gang. Even during hard times, Shosho had continued to give him assignments to distil and smuggle chang’aa, and this had laid the foundation for his future micro-enterprises. Monga and Brayo had also been family members of old and current bar owners, whereas the majority of the present gang members are not. Furthermore, the partnership between Kingi and his wife helped him to build the roadside restaurant and manage their money flow. In the following chapters, I will further explore how relationships with women (family bar owners, gang bosses, CBO leaders and wives) play a dominant role in processes of gang formation, imagining masculinities and trying to leave the gang. It is, however, possible to conclude now that Kingi, Monga and Brayo stood out compared to the participants in the outreach programme, because of their family ties to female bar owners, their connections with Safi and their experiences as youth leaders. All of this provided these young men with more options and social capital than their peers at the riverside when it came to making use of emerging opportunities. Moreover, most of the young men who have been able to leave the gangs at the riverside over the past decade had likewise been relatives of bar owners and members of youth groups. Many of the men who still worked the drums rowe had fewer connections to the alcohol bosses, fewer links to networks such as youth groups and NGOs, and, perhaps, less self-esteem as a result of feeling stuck at the riverside. Many even said that they did not feel as if they belonged to any other place than the riverside.

Without the back-up referred to, many outreach programme participants used their loans to address the multiple emergencies that mark life inside the ghetto. They were thus left without a business, but in debt to their own programme. The programme is still trying to break this downwards spiral, but the number of emergencies people face living in Mathare can be quite overwhelming, as is illustrated by Kingi's biographical narratives. Interestingly, Motion told me that despite not yet having profited financially from the programme, "it did help to make us feel closer to the community, to be more accepted by the community." Later, he also told me that this deeper sense of belonging to the community and feeling respected led to him becoming one of the frontrunners in a peace-building programme initiated by Kingi, Brayo and Monga in the run-up to the 2013 elections. I will return to the relationships between these men and what they termed the community in Chapter 5.
Conclusion

This chapter analysed possible pathways and strategies that young, male gang members navigated to leave the working gang, and why many failed despite their great efforts. In the past, chang’aa gangs allowed young men in Bondeni to establish themselves as senior men according to popular notions of manhood, as illustrated by Kingi’s life history. Yet, more recently, gangs also posed a dilemma when they became more permanent entities and the sole option for young men wanting to build meaningful lives within a context of deteriorating socio-economic conditions inside the ghetto. As a consequence, gang spaces were increasingly imagined as a way to cope with gendered experiences of hardship, although the members also felt more and more stuck in a position of junior manhood. Their frustrations were further exacerbated by the way these men were inscribed with the labels ‘ghetto boy’ and ‘thugs for hire’ by the dominant discourse and were killed as such by the police.

The discussion above showed that the trainers perceived themselves to be steps ahead of the participants in the outreach programme according to local notions of manhood, and so highlighting individual responsibility during the training bolstered their self-image. In particular, it underlined that their relative success was of their own making, and provided them with a feeling that they could help current gang members by being, in their words, a ‘good role model.” In their positioning as ‘wajanja, the fala position marked the boundaries of what this particular notion of manhood entailed to them. In contrast, many participants enacting agency largely by blaming structural forces and reimagining feelings of powerlessness (generally associated with the fala position) as part of performing the mjanja position. Nevertheless, even if all of these men shared the subject position of ‘ghetto boy’ in the dominant discourse, the way they negotiated this discourse and took up popular notions of manhood differed enormously. This was largely shaped by changing circumstances (for instance, a fall in profits from chang’aa in more recent times) and individual differences (for example, a lack of connections to bar owners and youth groups), but also by a sense of belonging (or not) to the community (see more in Chapter 5). Accordingly, differences in positioning among these men to some extent brought forth diverging choice-making processes that are central to their social navigation struggles.

The main social dynamics that seemed to help men to leave the gang hinged on their connections to bar owners (access to work) and their relationships with their wives. Other contributing factors appeared to be affiliations with and experiences in youth groups and other development organisations (skills, ideas and network/opportunities), a sense of self-esteem, which helped to develop a feeling of belonging outside the gang, and the recognition and seizing of less obvious opportunities. However, self-esteem ostensibly depended on individual achievements made possible through connections to bar owners and youth groups. Yet, the trainers of the outreach programme played it out as if success was a matter of choice. In the context of this programme, their notion of ‘the struggling street-smart hustler’ located the responsibility squarely with the individual man, as illustrated by their emphasis on the need ‘to change the mind-sets’ of the participants. Indeed, the trainers went to great lengths to hide the feelings of powerlessness that they
too often felt. The participants, on the other hand, more openly enacted the seemingly contradictory positions of the hustler and feeling powerless (dubbed the fool by the trainers). The ensuing conflicts between the majority of the participants and the trainers during the programme thus centred on how to consider the more structural forces that impacted individual and collective social navigation trajectories, and how this tied into imagining different positions of manhood. In private, the trainers often expressed temporal feelings of powerlessness to me, and this illustrates how context-bound their performances of different manhood positions in fact were.

This chapter illustrated how shifts in social environments (current possibilities and constraints) influenced possible social horizons (imagined future possibilities and constraints) and, thus, social navigation trajectories. Yet, it also revealed that despite current changes and increasingly bleaker social horizons, all of these young men (both the trainers and the participants) continued to picture themselves in the future as senior men and active fathers of their children. They envisaged different pathways to reaching independence, for instance by developing micro-businesses or becoming a bar owner. Seemingly against all odds, however, all these men relentlessly pursued these ambitions despite deteriorating present-day contexts and concurrent future possibilities. The vigour with which they held on to this vision may partly explain why all of these men were so active. They were literally constantly on the move, in action, responding to capricious presents (see also Vigh 2011, 2008) while holding on to very specific vistas. Their determination to move, to hope, and to try and achieve their ambitions probably derived from their multiple experiences that standing still equalled death. Kingi said: "There is no choice between death and life, you always choose life." Most men did temporarily lose hope, whether they revealed this or not, but the fear of death always compelled them back into action (see also Vigh 2011).

In the end, the majority of the One Touch participants did not succeed in setting up a micro-business outside the gang, as many chose to use the loans they had acquired for this purpose for emergencies. This begs the question as to whether access to more money made it easier for gang members to leave the working gang and, if not, which other factors were at play. In the next chapter, I take up this question by having a close look at a gang of drug dealers in Mathare who made more money than the chang’aa distillers.
CHAPTER 4: Showing Success: The Continuous Struggle to Leave the Gang.

Introduction
In the previous chapter, we have seen that alcohol distillers rarely made enough money to invest in the micro-businesses that would allow them to earn a steady income outside the gang and eventually leave. The desire to leave bound all of these young gang members together and emanated from a longing to be recognised as senior men. As noted in the previous chapter, working gangs were locally perceived as age-sets for recently circumcised men who were on their way to senior manhood, but who were still considered to be junior men. Access to a micro-loan programme, initiated by gang members and led by ex-gang members, as well as training in business skills, did help a few young men to leave the gang. Most of the programme’s participants, however, were set back by emergencies that consumed most of their business loans. This leads us on to the following question: was it perhaps easier for gang members who made more money to build a livelihood outside their gang? I explore this question below by taking a close look at a gang of drug dealers in Kosovo, Mathare. These men earned three times the money of the chang’aa distillers, and also had more free time as they generally worked in pre-scheduled shifts of eight hours. Nevertheless, despite more time and money, most of these drug dealers also struggled to leave their gang.

In order to examine why it was just as hard for drug dealers to leave a gang, I need to describe the practice of ranking among gangs. This will help to bring out how the individual social statuses of young men hinged on their ranking in and of groups. Then, I will proceed to look at the life trajectory of a drug dealer in an attempt to explore the difficulties encountered in trying to leave a gang. Paramount among these predicaments and anxieties was the fear of becoming redundant in relation to women. This chapter thus aims to reveal the great lengths that many relatively wealthier gang members went to in order to obtain and maintain a high social status in relation to their cohorts. In particular, consideration is given to how this was tied to the challenges that these men encountered in trying to leave the gang, and why only a few of them have been relatively successful.

Ranking: a purported hierarchy between gangs
Gangs distilling chang’aa, such as the One Touch group, occupied the bottom-most tier with respect to other gangs in Mathare, as their work was dirty, hard and provided little in the way of income in comparison. Kurank is a Sheng verb (derived from 'ranking') to indicate that a person, an object or a group is highly regarded. If someone says: ‘namrank huyo jamaa’ in Mathare Sheng this means: ‘I have a high regard for that guy.’ Taking a closer look at the practice of ranking, and how groups of young men in Mathare were engaged in maintaining their status with regard to each other, will help to unravel part of the answer.
as to why gang members who earned more than the *chang’aa* distillers still seemed to be trapped within the space of the gang and, as such, in a position of junior manhood.

I became aware of the practice of ranking between different types of ‘working’ gang (alcohol, *matatu* touts or drugs) when I met a group of heroin dealers at the Police Depot football field, locally dubbed just ’Depot’, near Kosovo in August 2008 (see map). Mwangi, a youth leader at Safi, asked me to accompany him to visit a group of friends in Kosovo after we had watched a football match at the venue. I was hesitant at first, because Kosovo was notorious at the time for its great insecurity. Mwangi assured me that this group had been organised as vigilantes and they would guarantee my safety. We thus walked from Depot to the sloping dirt road that cut Kosovo into two halves. Walking down, I admired the impressive variety of colourful kiosks, butchers stalls and video halls built from brightly painted iron sheets located on both sides of the rough path. The fresh colours of the houses and shops in Kosovo therefore differed completely from the rusty and dusty shacks that lined the streets in Bondeni Village. Down the hill, we entered a bar near the riverside with the name Ruff Skwad Beach Pub written in bright white letters set against a shiny purple background. Inside, I was met by red and blue disco lights, and saw a neat collection of clean and intact garden tables and plastic chairs. A professional counter took up one wall, and a fridge containing chilled sodas was positioned near a couch for lazing on. The beers and the other available drinks on display behind the counter gave the impression of an uptown bar in the city centre. A few men approached me. They were dressed in clean jeans, English league football shirts and flashy, clean sneakers, and they wore silver-like chunky chains around their necks. They escorted me to the ‘garden’, as they called a patch of green behind the bar near the dirty and smelly Mathare River. They had organised a few chairs for us outside, and presented me with the first chilled bottle of beer I have ever enjoyed inside the Mathare ghetto. While passing the inside of the bar, my eye had been drawn to not one, but two, big plasma TV screens locked behind robust and freshly painted metal cages, and outside we could still hear the music that was softly coming from what sounded like brand new speakers. I was amazed. These men, this bar, the cold beer in my hand and the ‘river garden’ did not correspond with what I generally associated with gang members in Mathare.

At the time, my Sheng was still rudimentary, and my friend kindly translated while the young men from what I came to know as the Ruff Skwad gang fired questions at me. One of them uttered in amazement: "You work with *rowe* ('the riverside' in the Kikuyu language, where alcohol was distilled)? Ha ha, that is down, completely down. We are not like that, AT ALL!" They continued to make fun of me because I worked with, what they termed, dirty drunkards, and I realised that the word 'down' carried multiple meanings and was appropriated by these men to set themselves apart from *wasee wa rowe* ('guys from the riverside' in Sheng, also sometimes stated as: *wasee wa down*). Although we were also sitting near the riverside, and as such 'down' the valley, these young men positioned themselves as 'up' on the other end of a putative hierarchy of gangs. I later learned that the Ruff Skwad gang dramatically shot up an imagined ranking scale when the heroin trade was first introduced to Mathare. Drugs like marijuana, cocaine and heroin had long been
available in the area. However, it was not until 2001 that an open field, which was later
dubbed Nigeria (after the alleged predominance of Nigerians in the international drug
trade), was established.¹ This ground, which was situated behind the Al Badr gas station,²
was easily accessible from outside for people who wanted to buy the product yet were
fearful of going deeper inside the ghetto. Business flourished, and the wadosi (‘bosses’ in
Sheng) looked to hire new dealers. As it happened, many wadosi had connections to and
relatives living in Kosovo, and members from the Ruff Skwad gang were the first to be
hired to work at Nigeria. The opportunity to deal heroin radically transformed the position
of the Ruff Skwad gang, as money started to pour in on a steady basis. Gang members easily
made between 500 and 1000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. five to ten Euros) a day, and they
also practiced ‘piracy’ (stealing from their bosses and selling the product themselves) at
times, through which they could double their earnings.

Within a few years, the Ruff Skwad gang established itself in Mathare as one of the
most stylish and visible gangs, and the beach pub near the riverside became a pinnacle of
pride to its members, with the two flat screen TVs underlining their status. To illustrate the
difference between the two gangs at the opposite ends of this purported ranking scale: the
One Touch members passed their free time drinking cheap liquor (chang’aa) while
squatting near an open sewer. They usually gambled directly on the muddy ground without
even a cover to shelter them from the rain. If it did not rain, they were still sprinkled with
the wet and hot debris released from the drums in regular intervals (the ‘bombs’ in Sheng).
Most days, the sun scorched the earth and slowly cooked the human waste that was openly
flowing into the river beside them. Add to this the heat and smoke coming from the drums
just a few metres away, and the environment these men worked in, and in which they spent
their free time, can justly be called dismal. In stark contrast, the Ruff Skwad members
generally relaxed with either a cold beer, which was a very expensive drink inside the
ghetto, or with miraa (‘khat’ in Kiswahili), which was also an expensive substance, while
watching football on one of the flat screens inside the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub. Given this
contrast, one might imagine that a distiller from Bondeni would aspire to be a drug dealer
in Kosovo. One day, I visited the One Touch distilling site with a Ruff Skwad gang member,
and, after he left, a few of the One Touch men shared with me their envy of his swag. This is
a Sheng term that means ‘style’, and is inspired by international Hip Hop slang. It refers to
dress, speech, movement and, sometimes, even attitude (see also Mose 2013:112). This
type of swag was out of reach for most alcohol distillers. For instance, a new football shirt
(Ruff Skwad’s trademark outfit) cost between 800 and 1600 Kenyan Shillings (depending
on the team), and was thus unaffordable to an alcohol distiller who did not earn more than
1900 a week (including potential piracy earnings). However, mobility between different
types of gang in different localities rarely occurred. As discussed in Chapter 2, membership
of a gang, and thus access to the work the gang was involved in, was largely determined by

¹ I cannot delve into the history of how this ground was established, and by whom, for reasons of privacy and
safety.
² In the course of this research project, its name was changed to Amana, but the place was often still referred
to as Al Badr.
a person’s locality and concomitant (family) networks, namely where they lived and what their family connections were.

**From selling drugs to selling craft**

The young man from Ruff Skwad I took to visit the One Touch distilling site was called Malik. I met Malik in August 2008 when he was a 21-year-old drug dealer. Since then, he has tried to leave the gang by selling crafts at tourist markets (popularly dubbed Maasai markets) in the uptown areas of Nairobi, but has never been able to make the transition completely. He did stop selling drugs in March 2009, and as such officially left this working gang. However, he continually struggled to make ends meet, despite his access to large loans through revolving credit schemes⁴ (e.g. Kimuyu 1999) and support from his family and friends. He was therefore always contemplating a return to dealing drugs, and kept close ties with the gang throughout this period. Looking at his trajectory shows the obstacles that many of the wealthier gang members in Mathare like Malik encountered in trying to leave the gang, and why leaving proved to be an incessant process for them, despite their relative wealth.

Malik’s decision to leave the gang followed the death of a drug addict in front of him after he had just supplied him with a shot of heroin. According to Malik, the man “already had a weak body, so then he injected and he died because his body could not take the drugs anymore.” Malik became very depressed and, after consulting his best friend and fellow drug dealer Blue, left the gang. He told me later:

When I saw this man die, it was not a first time, it is ...it happens many times at grouo (‘an open field’ in Sheng with which he meant the drug-trading field dubbed Nigeria in Mathare), but it shocked me and I never wanted to go back. I was thinking, how can I have a future with this. The money is good but we also lose it, the same, same day, we are livest (‘prone to enjoy life’ in Sheng), we live a life of bachelors. So how is this going to help me? I want to live in a stone house, and have a wife and children. I don’t think grouo can help me.

⁴ The revolving credit scheme is a ubiquitous institution in Nairobi ghettos (and elsewhere in Kenya) that was historically initiated by groups of women (e.g., Ellis et al. 2007). The first chamas (as these groups are dubbed in local Kiswahili) in Mathare emerged during the 1960s, and were inspired by the Harambee discourse instigated by the Kenyatta government (1964-1978) as part of its nationalist project. The mainstay of this discourse denoted the inability of any individual to progress without the help of fellow citizens, and was directed at organising people into groups within which members contributed the little they had (either in weekly instalments or through big fundraising functions) to help each other progress collectively and individually through, often quite intricate and elaborate, savings, loans and fundraising schemes. Other popular terms for such groups were self-help – development – groups, merry-go-rounds or cooperatives. In many cases, these chamas were dominated by women. Yet, more recently, and especially since the establishment of youth funds (see also Okoth et al. 2013) and other community development funds and loan schemes (by, for instance, NGOs such as Jamii Bora), young men have increasingly joined the women-dominated chamas or followed their example by forming their own as registered youth groups and/or community-based organisations.
Ever since I met Malik, his greatest desire in life was to get married and become a father. Most Ruff Skwad dealers had already fathered more than one child in their young lives, and some were also married to the mothers of their children. Yet, they, as Malik voiced it, lived “a life of bachelors.” By this, Malik meant that they spent their nights at the pub, chewing khat and peanuts or drinking beer, watching football and eating roasted meat, all considered to be typical ‘manly’ practices in Mathare (and, indeed, in Kenya – see also Mboya 2013). Malik thought that getting paid on a daily basis encouraged this lifestyle, and shared with me that he wanted to be a different kind of husband and father than his friends. At 21, he feared he was already getting too old. He said: “I need to become a father soon to be a man in ghetto, people are already talking...ha ha, all my friends they have kids, and me I am just a single... no...I want to marry and have kids.” As a well-earning drug dealer, Malik had moved to a two-room apartment in a stone tenement building in Kariobangi, a few kilometres from Mathare. This was, he told me, a first step towards fulfilling his dream of becoming a father. He said: "The first night I listened to music in a stone house, it is so much better, I had no idea, but the mabati (‘iron sheets’ in Kiswahili) make noise (rattle) when you play loud music, ha ha ha, this is where I want my children to grow up, in a stone house, not in ghetto." Leaving the work of dealing drugs indicated leaving the gang, but Malik continued to be a mbeshte (‘a male best friend’ in Sheng) at the Ruff Skwad baze, and spent most of his nights watching football with the Ruff Skwad gang members at the beach pub near the river in Kosovo.

After leaving the gang, Malik struggled to pay the rent for his house outside the ghetto, which cost twice as much as a similar space inside Mathare. He was, however, adamant that he would not move back to Kosovo, because living in a stone house and leaving the gang were part of realising his dream of getting married and becoming a father. As a consequence, these were key steps in his social navigation trajectory with a view to achieving senior manhood. He also did not want to lose face among his friends, as moving back to the ghetto would be the equivalent of admitting defeat. He feared that he would be viewed as a failure for not making it outside the gang and the ghetto, even if this was the material reality he lived every day. Gang members not only dreamt of leaving the gang, but all also expressed the goal of leaving the ghetto as well. This shows that many men were trying to strike a balance between pursuing future aspirations and maintaining their status in the now. Indeed, many of them regarded a strong position as a junior man as a key step in achieving senior manhood.

Malik hustled doing odd jobs to get by, before he finally decided to join his father's workshop in Kosovo. His father was a relatively successful craftsman who sold necklaces and other beadwork jewellery at the various Maasai markets in the city centre and other affluent areas. Malik’s decision to join his father's workshop seemed to be a logical and obvious step at first glance, yet he had a very difficult relationship with his father, and it took him more than a year to finally decide to join his business. He did so eventually because he had met a girl in Kosovo and wanted to get married at the age of 22. Other
ventures had failed to provide him with a long-term prospect of earning money. Malik's father treated him as a servant from the start, and he was given little to no leeway to sell his own handmade jewellery. Competition at the market was high, and Malik's father told him that he could not afford to help his son for fear of losing business himself. In practice, this meant that Malik never made enough money to sustain himself and his girlfriend. Gradually, Malik also began to doubt whether he was his 'father's' biological son, and both the persistent lack of money and uncertainty about his family relationships sparked a highly troubled period in his life that eventually also had implications for his marriage.

'I scored two goals': becoming a father on a football field

A few months after he had left the Ruff Skwad gang, Malik met a beautiful young woman called BT, who immediately moved into his house in Kariobangi. He and his girlfriend, who he proudly called his “wife”, both worked to generate an income for rent, food and even for a few, what were locally taken to be, luxury items such as a fridge, a computer and a microwave. BT worked as a hairdresser in a hair salon in one of Nairobi’s back-alleys. It was not a fancy place, but she had a steady customer base and worked long hours. There was tension between the couple from the start, as BT felt uncomfortable because she made more money than Malik, which was a sentiment that Malik shared and felt deeply frustrated about. She soon began to hide her income from him, and only contributed to the rent and food when Malik clearly could not. After a few months, BT left Malik for another man, but when she found out she was pregnant returned to his house on the day I arrived back in Kenya in July 2010 for a long period of fieldwork. Malik and I met in the city centre for a beer, and he told me that he feared the baby was not his, and asked me whether it was possible to do a DNA test on a foetus. He really wanted to become a father and continue in the marriage, but felt unsure about BT’s love for him. On 13 January 2011, Malik became a father of twin girls while he was playing a friendly football match in Mathare. He phoned me that evening to announce the birth as follows: "ha ha ha ha, you can’t imagine. I scored two goals, one for each daughter. I honoured them with my game. You have to come tomorrow, we can go see my daughters."

The next day, we met in Nairobi city centre and bought food and medical supplies for his girlfriend and daughters. Malik had taken BT to Nazareth Hospital, which is a maternity hospital 25 kilometres outside Nairobi and widely known for the high quality of its maternity unit. He explained to me that it was the hospital his girlfriend had chosen. He had agreed because he did not want her to give birth at the Pumwani maternity hospital close to Kosovo, which was locally perceived to be a facility for ‘poor people.’ Indeed, he was set on giving BT the best care, even if it would cost him more than he could afford, and even if travelling to and from the facility took three hours in total. Malik had to travel to the hospital every day to take food to his girlfriend, along with other items needed for his premature daughters, such as nappies and medicines. Most hospitals in Kenya only provide the absolute basics, and the food on offer is of such a low nutritious value and quantity that

---

4 Such as sweeping roads as part of a failed youth employment scheme in Nairobi – and nationwide – that was linked to the city council of Nairobi; see also Majiwa 2011; Kasarani Youth Congress 2009.
a woman nursing a baby (or two) needs supplementary food items from outside. This meant that, for weeks on end, Malik could not go to the market and sell his crafts, as he had to take care of his girlfriend and daughters in hospital. Moreover, the Nazareth unit is more expensive than Pumwani, and the bill was enormous, whereas the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF – Mathauer et al. 2008) covered only a small percentage of this. As a consequence, upon his new family’s discharge from hospital, Malik was broke, and started his life as a father deeply in debt.

Nonetheless, Malik was elated, bordering on relieved, that he was a father of two girls at the age of 24. He told me over and over again that his family and friends in Mathare had already considered him to be old to become a father, with most of his peers taking that step by the age of 20. Malik confided in me that he now felt that his social position as a man was more secure with regard to his community. Indeed, I noticed that inside Kosovo – where he still spent most of his time - he walked taller than before, a proud father of two girls, although in private he constantly worried about his relationship.

**Who is the head of the house?**

A few months after the babies were born, Malik’s girlfriend resumed her work at the hair salon in the city centre. A housemaid was hired to take care of the young girls, and Malik concentrated on his craft business that he operated from his father’s workshop in Kosovo. According to Malik, BT increasingly expected him to provide for daily expenses, while she saved her own wages and did not reveal to him how much she earned. Burdened with debt, he never sold enough to meet all their costs, and this caused him to search frantically for other ways to earn money. This dominated our conversations. He was so desperate that he even considered going back to dealing heroin, but Blue, his best friend and a fellow Ruff Skwad gang member, advised against it and stated in clear terms: "You came this far without groupo, we don’t want you back, because you will never leave. We are proud you made it out, you are like a role model, we can’t have you back." In the same discussion with Blue, Malik explained to me that he did not mind that BT did not disclose her earnings to him or that he was expected to be the sole provider for the household; in fact, he expected this of himself. This position fit in well with the dominant imaginaries on masculinities that he and many other young men in Mathare adhered to. "You know what we say? Ha ha, chake ni chake, changu ni chenu (‘what is hers is hers, what is mine is ours’ in Kiswahili). So yes, we need to provide and they can ask us anything. Even for hair!" Blue and Malik laughed about this, and tried to trump each other by confessing to the extraordinary items they had paid for during past relationships, which varied from beauty and styling products to school fees.

Yet, Malik remained strikingly silent during this discussion about the fact that he had recently paid off a 40,000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 400 Euros) debt for his girlfriend, which was money he had intended to use to pay the bride’s wealth to his mother-in-law. On top of this, Malik had recently replaced a perfectly good sofa because his wife-to-be preferred a different style, requiring the spending of another 25,000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 250 Euros) within the space of three months. These are just a few examples of the
money Malik spent, seemingly at the request of his wife-to-be, on items that were commonly deemed to be somewhat of a luxury. Accordingly, he had already been heavily in debt with several local saving groups on the day his baby daughters were discharged from the hospital. He paid the hospital bills by taking on even more loans from different savings groups in different localities to avoid exposure. This was a highly dangerous endeavour, because these groups generally did not hesitate to involve the police in order to settle outstanding loans. Indeed, many people have ended up in prison by acting in that way. Malik thus took exceptional risks, because he imagined himself as the sole provider:

My wife, she thinks she can be the head because she makes more money. She works in town, and is proud. But even if she makes more money, I am the husband. She can give me advice, but I am the head, the neck can't take over the head. I can't give her permission to do what she wants, she can't take that freedom. Money is not the head of the house. But she thinks it is, she makes more money, she wants to complain, so we fight. She thinks money is the head of the house, but I am.

Malik went well out of his way to show BT and others that he was able to provide and should thus be regarded as a man according to local notions of manhood. The modes in which he and many other young ghetto men continued to affirm the role of the provider against all odds stemmed from a deep desire to still feel in charge. Malik’s case was not unique; many men I worked with – both alcohol distillers and drug dealers – overspent in their performance of popular positions of manhood.

Many young men in Mathare grew up without a father, but nevertheless harboured ideas of manhood that defined men as heads of households and main breadwinners for, and protectors of, women and children (see also Silberschmidt 2004: 45-7/51, 2001; Hunter 2006: 102; Lindsay and Miescher 2003: 20). Most young men in Mathare carried multiple burdens and tried to care of a grandmother, a mother, several sisters, a wife, and children. Cast as ‘ghetto boys’ in dominant discourse, and blocked from social and economic opportunities to establish themselves as senior men in society, marriage and family were often perceived to be key domains in which they could still try and claim power. Trying at least denoted not giving up, but not being able to live up to dominant standards of masculinity exacerbated the sense these men shared of being stuck in the space of the gang.

Malik was continually frustrated, as necessity often forced his girlfriend to supplement his earnings. During these incidents, she accused him, not entirely without reason, of spending his money on drinking, clothes and football. It did not take long before Malik and BT were arguing over money almost every night, and one day he came back home from the market to find his house empty; his girlfriend had left him again, and this time she had taken his daughters and everything else in the home. The first night that he slept rough in his own house, Malik made a decision. A friend from Kosovo had found work in Qatar as a driver, and had told Malik that he made more money in a month than Malik
Malik went to the city centre with a broken heart and sold his place at the Maasai market. With the money, he bought a forged driving licence and hotel management certificate, and, at an unremarkable office in a backstreet off River Road, applied for a job in Qatar. He told me:

Maybe she wants to come back, if I have money. If we did not have children, I could let her go, this is the second time she leaves me because of money, she betrays me, I can't trust her, love is not good for me. But for my daughters, I cannot leave them. They are my angels. I want to earn money for their education, so they have a life different than me. But how can I take back my wife? Nobody trusts her now, they will look at me, ehhhh you know like you are the husband, but she can do this to you? My mother cannot talk with her now. We can't live in a family like that. But maybe I take her back. I love her. I want to be a father to my girls, they are my daughters. I know people majuu ('the West' in Sheng) they can't do that. Just let me go there and I can face all the challenges, as long as I know I make money for them, enough, so they can go to school by bus.

Malik's girlfriend had left him because, as he saw it, she regarded him as a failed provider and thus a failed father, husband and man. Tellingly, he reassured me time and again that he had been a good man, had always come home in time to see his daughters before bedtime, and had shared all his money with his girlfriend. Even if this had not been the case all the time, his repeated attempts to convince me, and more so himself, that he had been a 'good man', all the more revealed his anxieties over his position as a man. It also shows how he tried to claim the moral upper hand by taking up a position of victimhood and blaming his girlfriend for his predicament. This position was, however, short-lived, as he also confided in me that he had to agree with her: he had failed as a provider. This made him feel extremely insecure about his social position as a man in relation to his peers and family. He constantly worried about what others thought of him, what they knew about his problems, and whether they too judged him as a failed father and husband, and, as such, a failed man. Not being able to live up to popular standards of masculinity caused Malik so much stress that he began to lose weight, and he also developed severe headaches and stomach pains.

In the end, Malik never went to Qatar, because it had been a scam. After he made repeated efforts to reconcile with her, BT and his twin daughters returned to him briefly. Yet, once again, the couple endured a turbulent period during which harsh words and blows were exchanged. Malik finally went for a DNA test, because he felt he could not leave his wife if he was the biological father of the now two-year-old girls. The test concluded that the children were not his biological daughters, and this eventually compelled him to separate from his wife and to stop acting as the father of the babies. Malik was left devastated, broke and extremely insecure:
I am back to square one. My mum tells me, I will get new twins, beautiful girls like them. I miss them so much. It is hard to get used to be without them. It is hard to trust again. How can I? I don’t know why I have this life, I lost everything. I am so confused. No one is on my side, not my dad, not my wife, I can’t talk to my friends, maybe my mum, but this life is too hard. Why is this happening to me? I sometimes can’t believe this is all happening to me. I can even cry when I am alone.

At the time of writing this chapter, Malik was still contemplating re-joining the Ruff Skwad gang and dealing heroin again, given that selling crafts did not even earn him enough for his own upkeep. He struggled each month to pay rent for his house outside Mathare, but still did not want to move back to Kosovo, although he spent most of his time there and survived by eating at his mother’s house. He told me: “If not for my Mum, I don’t know how I will be living in the past few months.” Besides food, she gave him some money each month to help him pay the rent, as she too was proud to have a son who lived outside the ghetto. Yet, Malik, to his own embarrassment, was still considered to be a bachelor at 27, not just by his parents, but also by his peers. Indeed, everyone close to him knew exactly what had been going on in his life, despite his efforts to conceal his ill fate.

Overspending by taking out loans had been one of Malik’s key strategies in his social navigation struggles geared towards achieving senior manhood. As a consequence, performing the role of provider was his main mode of negotiating the dominant discourse on masculinities, enacting fatherhood and claiming his status as a man, but this had backfired dramatically. Even after failing to live up to his girlfriend’s expectations, as well as his own, Malik continued to endow this dominant standard with certainty and judged himself accordingly. This was further affirmed by the way his friends, family and neighbours appraised him according to this standard. In compensation, he invested increasing amounts of money and time in dressing well and going out with Blue and other Ruff Skwad gang members. He went to reggae clubs, football matches in city stadiums and even to Uganda to watch the Harambee Stars (Kenya’s national team) lose against Uganda’s national team. Facing more and more obstacles, Malik increasingly sought refuge in the space of the gang, and this denoted investing valuable resources in concomitant bonding practices. He repeatedly could not pay his rent, yet continued to spend money on going out and dressing in a stylish manner because, as he put it: "I can’t lose my value, I have to look smart to keep my value as a man in ghetto, ha ha kuwaonyesha picha poa ('to show them a good picture' in Sheng).” After losing almost everything in life, dressing well and going out with his fellow gang members became one of the only modes available to Malik to enact manhood and maintain some kind of social status, at least with regard to his peers. I have observed this mode among many Ruff Skwad and One Touch gang members who faced similar dilemmas.
On fake and real manhood

Performing swag ('style' in Sheng) became a way for Malik to claim power as a mbeshte ('friend' in Sheng) with regard to his peers (mabeshte in Sheng) and counter the impact of what he considered to be his deteriorating social position as a junior man. Swag was a significant mode through which young ghetto men were able to claim power with regard to peers inside the ghetto. This in part emanates from how they counterposed ghetto swag to the style performances of wealthy youths in Kenya. Although sharing many commonalities, the ghetto youths experienced deep distinctions between wealthy youths and themselves, and often enacted a position of 'ghetto pride' by articulating these fault lines. To them, their swag was more real as it was created in a context of extreme hardship (also dubbed hard core in Sheng), whereas wealthier youths were taken to be fake as they had the means to develop styles with greater ease and therefore with less creativity. This binary between fake and real in relation to creativity, talent and humour resonates with the way these terms are often conceptualised in international Hip Hop practices (see also Mose 2013:120-121).

One day, I asked Malik about his love for fashion, as he seemed to own a never-ending variety of high fashion garments from upmarket brands such as Louis Vuitton:

You see I like fashion ha ha ha, I want my madigaga (glasses in Sheng) to match my shirt and my shoes, and even my bag. I want a linen suit, I think it is smart on me, can you buy me one? Or next time, bring me one from Holland, I know they are cheap there. Here it is hard to find a match suit at Gikosh ('Gikomba' in Sheng, a big market in Nairobi), mitush ('second-hand clothes' in Sheng), they don't come together like in shops. I have a friend who selects my things from camera. With my style, I like it when people look at me and they can't read I am from ghetto, they think I am from Westi ('Westlands' in Sheng), they can never believe I am from ghetto. But mapunk ('rich and trendy youth' in Sheng) in Westi, I see them in tao ('city centre' in Sheng), at the market, they dress outrages ha ha ha, you can't dress like that. Jeans are too tight and t-shirts with very, very bright colours. In ghetto people will laugh at you. You see wasee wa ghetto (young men from the ghetto in Sheng), maboyz (young men from the ghetto in Sheng), they wear a (football) jersey, and (loose) jeans, maybe rasta or jodo (a shaved head in Sheng), but never a big Mohawk (at the time a stylish haircut among wealthier youths in Kenya), maybe just a shadow one, like footballers, but a big one, that is for mababi ('wealthy youth' in old Sheng), mapunk. That is fake. Even me, I can never do that, or a ring in my ear, ha ha ha in ghetto they think that is for girls. Before, heheheheh rasta was for Mungiki, so no one, no one had rasta, because the police can just shoot you, but they shaved it so now rasta is ok, ha ha ha it is cool. But now I am thinking of growing mandefu (beard in Kiswahili), and

---

5 This term is used in Sheng to describe the moment a new bag of second hand clothes is opened by wholesalers at Gikomba market, where people can buy items for a wholesale price.
shave my head, ha ha to look like an Al Shabaab (‘Somali or Muslim youth’ in Sheng), with my white (Muslim) cap.

With great enthusiasm, Malik observed the styles of dance hall, international Hip Hop, and many other types of black Atlantic music artist, as well as wealthier Kenyan youths. He appropriated, incorporated, imitated and re-styled elements, thus constantly broadening his registers of possibility. Using fashion, he sometimes intentionally downplayed his putative ghettoness by switching codes and using styles from different cultural repertoires. This included a style he appropriated from what he considered to be Somali youths and whom he, jokingly, referred to as Al Shabaab, after the militant Somali youth movement (see also BBC 2014). He told me he liked to confuse people and impress rich girls, and his sense of style helped him in navigating city spaces without too much police interference. Dressing a certain way, he had discovered, even fooled the police, as they too considered him to be punk (‘rich and trendy youth’ in Sheng). However, even if Malik always surprised others and me with his style, he did observe clear boundaries between what he and other young ghetto men considered to be ghetto and punk style codes, and although he stretched the borders of what was widely understood by them as appropriate ‘ghetto fashion’, as Malik also put it, he did not cross these boundaries. These boundaries changed constantly, but they were always imagined in relation to putative punk codes, which are codes that young ghetto men attributed to wealthy youths. Mapunk in Sheng refers to youths who are imagined by their ghetto counterparts to live on estates and practice a luxurious and trendy lifestyle.

The Ruff Skwad gang members generally encountered wealthier youths more frequently than their One Touch counterparts. This was because alcohol distillers mostly spent their time near the river, and rarely ventured outside the ghetto. Ruff Skwad members, however, were far more mobile, and had more money to go out to, for instance, city bars and clubs. These interactions greatly influenced the representations of the self among these young ghetto men, and as such shaped their modes of enacting manhood. Young men like Malik appropriated and re-styled allegedly punk codes to gain respect among peers, as it signalled to others what these young men called “exposure.” With this, they mostly meant interactions with ideas, people, groups and organisations outside the ghetto. In other contexts, it could mean ‘knowing too much’ with regard to crime, pornography and other alleged perversions of local values. Accordingly, the local Sheng use of the term exposure has positive and negative connotations. With regard to swag, exposure added value to the performances of junior manhood by these men. Rejecting certain punk codes while appropriating others helped these men to mark ghetto swag, which to them was the embodiment of modern styles, and provided evidence of higher levels of exposure. For instance, the absence of ear, brow and nose piercings accompanied with the right types of jewellery, such as the chunky silver-like rings and necklaces also popular among mapunk at the time of my research, allowed Malik to display his levels of exposure. The right type of jewellery made the absence of piercings stand out twice as much. One had to be familiar with punk codes to be able to visibly reject certain aspects and
appropriate others. Which putative punk codes served which purpose shifted constantly, but the boundaries of what constituted ghetto swag were always imagined in terms of masculine versus feminine styles. At the time of my fieldwork in 2010 and 2011 for instance, ear, brow and nose piercings were considered to be feminine by young men in the ghetto, and thus only suitable for mapunk, whereas rings and necklaces, which were also sported by mapunk, were regarded as masculine and therefore also befitting ghetto swag.

Codes constructed by maboyz ('young men from the ghetto' in Sheng) were not, however, only informed by punk codes, as illustrated by Malik. Nevertheless, young ghetto men did predominantly demarcate ghetto swag by othering allegedly punk styles, and by taking their swag as a cut above mapunk. In their constructions of gendered senses of the self, maboyz like Malik constantly compared themselves to mapunk, giving their own expressions to the rift they experienced in urban youth culture in Nairobi between the rich and poor or, more accurately, between Westi and Eastlando (Eastlands in Sheng, a neighbourhood where most of the ghettos are located). In this dichotomy, maboyz regarded themselves as being men who listened to reggae and certain types of (political and gangsta) Hip Hop and dance-hall music, and who wore sneakers, loose jeans, chunky jewellery and football shirts (working gang members), or rolled up pipe jeans, plastic shoes, tight shirts and leather bracelets (wagondi gang members). Mapunk, meanwhile, were imagined to listen to house, r&b and other types of romantic and soft music, and to wear tight (skinny) jeans and bright colours according to the latest fashions from majuu ('the West' in Sheng). Mapunk, in the eyes of maboyz, were not street-smart (ujanja or ujanjess in Sheng), but foolish (ufala in Sheng), soft, feminine and fake – that is copying the West. In contrast, maboyz constructed a sense of 'ghetto pride' based on being street smart, tough, together and the provider. Ghetto pride was one of the sub-dominant positions of manhood enacted by young men in Mathare in order to claim status and negotiate dominant discourses on citizenship and masculinities that labelled these men as ghetto boys.

A telling incident that occurred during my fieldwork in 2010-2011 illustrates how these counter-positions were shaped by, and shaped, everyday encounters. One day, Malik’s friend Kamaa entered the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub in Mathare sporting a big Mohawk, which was a trendy hairstyle in American Hip Hop and r&b culture at the time. However, he was ridiculed to such an extent that he left again and went to the barber shop to have his head shaved. Malik later explained to me that they laughed at him because he had copied a punk style, and that made him double fake, that is copying a style from mapunk who had in turn copied their style from majuu. According to these young men, there was a major difference between copying and re-styling, and this difference marked what they imagined to be real swag, which, as they saw it, could only emerge from the ghetto. Using stupid, soft, fake and feminine as derogatory terms when talking of mapunk was a serious challenge, as they were very conscious of the fact that they were talking about men of their age – their counterparts in wealthier settings – and not women. The othering of mapunk by constructing them as feminine in derogatory terms shows that these men tried to counteract their envy of mapunk by demarcating boundaries that separated masculine maboyz from feminine mapunk in order to revalue themselves and claim power as, in the
words of Malik, "real men." This also highlights that how these young men negotiated dominant discourses and positioned themselves had an impact on their decision-making, and this shaped social navigation trajectories. Their particular positioning as *wajanja* entailed investing vast time and resources in performing *swag*, and this had repercussions for their other activities, as I will show below.

These men used the terms real and fake as English words in Sheng, and their meaning was inspired by international Hip Hop slang (*see also* Alim et al. 2008). The use of real and fake in Sheng, though often ambiguous, will become clearer when we look at the meanings of *punk* in this tongue. The word *punk* in Sheng is also inspired by international Hip Hop slang, and in this type of slang carries multiple meanings. It can, for instance, denote a gangster, an inexperienced youth or someone who has disappointed someone. Yet it also means someone who represents himself (it is generally used to refer to men) as autonomous and independent in style, speech and action. The latter meaning of *punk* in Hip Hop slang bears a close relation to the notions of autonomy, self-expression, resistance and anarchy that were central to the *punk* youth cultures of the early 1980s in the West. In this vein, a person who is imagined to be *punk* can, to some extent, be taken as someone who is considered to be ‘real’ by others. So why did *punk* come to mean the opposite in Sheng? To answer this, it is necessary to take a closer look at the older Sheng word for *mpunk* (*’singular for mapunk’* in Sheng), which was *mbabi*.

During the 1990s, the term *mbabi* also meant a youth who lived a wealthy and trendy lifestyle, and was a play on the word ‘Babylon.’ In the Rastafarian religion, the term Babylon has many different meanings, but is often used to describe oppressive systems of power that are infested with corruption, perversion and slavery (*e.g.* Murrell 1998:6), all of which are considered to be an affront to the ‘Word of Jah.’ Reggae has been the dominant popular youth culture in Nairobi’s ghettos ever since it became a worldwide phenomenon during the 1970s (King 1998), and a lot of Sheng words are actually inspired by Jamaican Patois through the reggae and dance hall music that is played everywhere and all the time, especially in *matatus*. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, gangsta rap became popular worldwide (Fernandes 2011:9-10), including in Kenya. Many wealthier youths in particular took up and played with gangsta repertoires in their dress, speech and how they walked. Youths from the Nairobi ghettos also took a liking to gangsta rap, but retained their great sense of affinity with reggae and dance hall music and cultural styles, which they mixed with putative Kenyan and ghetto elements such as pipe-jeans, Bata Sahara boots, *kikoy* shirts (embroidered and woven cotton shirts for men) and *kangas* (colourfully printed clothes for women). The term *mbabi* became popular among these ghetto youths as a way to describe what they took to be spoilt copycats, namely youths who, in their eyes, dressed like American rappers in oversized t-shirts and baggy jeans without any notion of what living in a ghetto and like a gangster really entailed. With the rise of Hip Hop and gangsta rap in Kenya, the term *mbabi* gradually became replaced by the word *mpunk* probably for two reasons. The first of these was perhaps the ubiquity of the term *punk* in gangsta rap lyrics, while the second could be linked to the appropriation of *Afropunk-fashion* among
wealthy youths in recent years. Nevertheless, it retained its meaning of 'rich and spoiled wannabe.'

**We ‘African’ men**

Malik and the other Ruff Skwad gang members went a step further and often articulated notions of manhood while using the term 'African.' In doing so, they counterposed dominant masculinities in the ghetto even more strongly to the putative feminine and fake masculinities of *mapunk*, by taking the latter as having allegedly 'Western' qualities. But what does African in popular use mean in relation to masculinities, and why did putative *punk* codes become increasingly imbued with popular notions of the West?

Many young men in the ghetto often referred to themselves as "we African men" when explaining certain relationships, events or processes to me. They would say, for instance: "We African men, we just like football too much", or "We African men, we cannot do like white people, and share 50-50. We take care of our family because we are men, that is our job." The first layer of understanding as to why many Ruff Skwad members (and most other men I worked with) used this phrase has to be sought in the fact that they were talking to me, a white woman from Europe. They associated with me, for instance, certain ideas on gender equality because of their views on white people from the West. By positioning themselves as we African men, they aimed to, in advance, both demarcate a clear self in relation to me, and legitimise certain qualities of what they considered to be manhood, which are qualities they thought would be regarded critically by me. However, in light of the above, it is not difficult to detect that they were not just talking to me when referring to we African men, but also to their wealthier counterparts, and perhaps even more so.

In positioning themselves as we African men, they drew on the highly perilous and forged, but ubiquitous, dominant discourse on tradition versus modernity that in Kenya is often captured in terms of 'Africa' versus 'the West' (see also Spronk 2009). This is evidenced, for instance, by the way they used the term African men instead of referring to themselves as Kenyan. Although seemingly clear-cut in the dominant discourse, these intersecting binaries were highly ephemeral and inconsistent, and it was difficult for young ghetto men to pin down what to them constituted one or the other. The highly erratic and ever-shifting ways in which these men drew on these problematic dichotomies did, however, consistently reflect their shared position that young ghetto men embodied what they dubbed “real African manhood”, even if it was not at all clear to them what African manhood actually entailed. This ambivalence led these men to constantly and anxiously redraw boundaries. Malik illustrates these inconsistencies and complexities, and ensuing anxieties, in the following:

I want to get rid of this African couch, ha ha I should say couch now, not sofa, ha ha. I learned that from couch surfing (a website for travellers worldwide). I am online, a member so tourists can come to my house and sleep on my couch. I want to have a European house, like my cupboard, that design I took
it from a picture from internet. I want to put glasses and wine, so it looks more for mlami ('white' in Sheng). I like fashion, trendy looks...styles like in movies, from majuu ('the West' in Sheng). I don't like this backward African style.

In the brief period that his wife and daughters returned to him in early 2013, Malik had bought a new cabinet made out of steel and glass that replaced the old one made from heavy wood. He had painted his entire room a deep, dark red to provide the new cupboard with a complementary background. The heavy brown sofa set stood out as ugly and boring against this display of style, according to Malik. I laughed and made a half-hearted joke that it would be somewhat illogical to buy a new sofa, the third in three years, when he was already two months behind with his rent. He froze mid way through an animated gesture and told me with a smile that I did not understand. He explained that he could not live the way people did in the ghetto. He, in his words, considered their style to be “African and backward”, whereas he dreamed of a more mlami ('white person' in Sheng) style, by which he often meant a trendier and more fashionable lifestyle, which is what he saw in Hollywood movies. He had to leave the 'ghetto style' behind, he said, and one way to do that was to change his style of living, dressing and even eating. For example, he never ate lunch at a roadside restaurant in Mathare, choosing instead to either eat at his mother’s house or cross Juja Road to eat Enjera or Pilau in Eastleigh, which were dishes that were considered to be festive foods in Mathare and which cost about 150 Kenyan Shillings, or a half day’s pay for most.

Malik expressed a deep desire to belong to, in his words, a bigger and more powerful world, which he dubbed mlami, Western, or majuu ('the West' or 'oversees' in Sheng). He was always engaged in re-styling, reinventing and appropriating elements from what he took to be mlami and global fashion trends. We often spoke English, but he always said these words in Sheng because they were laden with emotion for him, so heavy with meaning that he could only express this in a language close to his heart, namely Sheng. Majuu was where he wanted to go, where he thought he would find solutions to his problems, and where he got most of the inspiration for his lifestyle. As discussed above, he got his fashion ideas from many different sources. However, he not only looked at black Atlantic music cultures, Muslim Somali religious dress and local youth cultures; he also took inspiration from Hollywood movies, pictures of European football players, and websites on Italian fashion, American architecture and home decoration. From these latter sources, he picked up ideas that formed the foundation of what he imagined to be mlami and global fashion trends. Often, Malik showed me pictures of new shoes and clothes he had downloaded from the internet on his Samsung mobile phone with a touch screen. He used these pictures to shop at Gikomba, the largest second-hand clothes market in Nairobi, or ordered clothes from friends who sold second-hand goods and could pick out the best for him.

His notions of the global, the fashionable and whiteness were thus entangled in his conceptualisation of the West, and stood, ostensibly, in contrast to his ideas of what
constituted Africanness, backwardness and the local, and perhaps even ghettoness. Interestingly, he also considered the styles displayed by African American Hip Hop artists to be *mlami*, because to him they lived a *mlami* lifestyle. He saw parts of this lifestyle in Hollywood movies and on MTV Cribs, a US MTV programme that was also aired on MTV in Africa, and which showed international celebrities in their extravagant houses. Taking black artists as white was not uncommon among the young men in Mathare. Many, for instance, also conceptualised 50 Cent (a famous African American gangsta rapper) as white for similar reasons, and at times even jokingly took up a counter position by calling themselves 10 Cent (referring to the price of a glass of *chang’aa*, which is 10 Kenyan Shillings). The term white or *mlami* was therefore less based on phenotypes and more on notions of social class, geographical spaces, and specific cultural identifications, practices and performances. Malik did regard African Americans who lived in the ghettos of major US cities as black, and also perceived strong commonalities between him and them: “In ghettos, it is blacks, in America, also in Brazil, they have black people in ghettos.” Yet, he never referred to himself as black, but always African, whereas he did imagine a common ghettoness with, for instance, African Americans who lived in marginalised neighbourhoods in US cities. This was a sentiment, or a sense of “diasporic intimacy” (Gilroy 1993), that derived from experiencing similar social realities (Samper 2004).

At the same time, Malik took great pride in being an African man from the ghetto. Indeed, he fully adhered to the position of ghetto pride, which centred on notions of real African manhood. This suggests that the seemingly rigid and highly problematic divide between white/trendy and African/backwards was just one of the modalities appropriated by Malik and others to negotiate the dominant discourse on tradition and modernity. On many occasions, Malik celebrated an imagined African masculinity that hinged on what was commonly referred to as ‘African traditions.’ These were popular and highly mythologised notions of what constituted ‘authentic African cultures.’ Among these notions, the role of men as the provider was paramount. In the same breath as he expressed his admiration for *mlami* styles, Malik often rebutted local imaginings of Western ideas and practices such as gender equality or homosexuality. In doing so, he drew from the dominant representation of ‘Westernisation’ as a growing process of immorality (Spronk 2009:507), which is widely perceived to be eroding putative traditional (or ‘African’) cultures in Kenya.

Interestingly, the provider was imagined as the embodiment of ‘traditional African masculinity’ in the dominant discourse, yet this notion emerged during the colonial era in response to changes wrought by government policies. The rise of wage labour and overpopulation in the Native Reserves had a profound impact on existing gender roles (Silberschmidt 1999:48). Women were less and less able to feed their families with what they produced on the family farms. Subsistence farm work is still generally taken as female labour in Kenya, and in pre-colonial times was one of the ways women contributed to the survival of their families. However, land became a growing problem within the confines of these reserves. As a consequence, families became increasingly dependent on the money

---

6 This emic term was often used by young men in Mathare, and described, among other things, 'being born in and having survived the hard life in the ghetto.'
(mostly) men were able to earn as migrant workers on, for instance, European farms (see also Chapter 1). As a result, a new social value system developed that bestowed men in particular with new obligations and responsibilities. This was epitomised by the imaginary of the provider (Silberschmidt 1999: 49). What this imaginary entailed in precise terms was constantly redefined in relation to ever shifting contexts, yet it continued to centre on male responsibilities. This was especially the case in the urban area, as women often continued to practice subsistence farming rurally, which shaped different notions of the provider. These changes, especially in the urban contexts, do not withstand the fact that ‘the provider’ predominantly remained a male position, including in rural contexts. Interestingly, among young, urban professional couples in Nairobi who earned comparable salaries, the male provider role continued to shape gender relations, which continues to be affirmed by both men and women (Spronk 2012: 62/266, footnote 17).

In his enactment of manhood, Malik also took pride in following, what he termed, an “African style”, despite his earlier statement about mlami styles. When showing me pictures from the internet of shoes, clothes or houses, Malik often said: “We African men, we know how to dress well, ha ha, in ghetto we know swag!” He encountered many white tourists on the Maasai markets, and often shared with me that he never understood what to him seemed to be their lack of style, as he assumed that they at least had the money to dress in a stylish way. His remarks on ghetto swag were thus made as much with regard to white tourists as to mapunk. His notions of ghetto swag therefore seem to contradict his earlier view of the ghetto as backwards, and of Africanness as synonymous with this. All of this shows that Malik and other young men in Mathare often drew on the dominant binaries counterposing popular notions of tradition and modernity (intersecting with shifting notions of Africanness and Westernisation) when imagining the ghetto and enacting manhood, although they did so unpredictably and very inconsistently. African manhood in the imaginaries of young ghetto men could denote both tradition and modernity, and their positioning as we African men was not at all automatically counterposed to popular notions of modernity or the West. At times, African manhood and ghettleness were even considered to be the epitome of modern style. Seeing themselves as being in the vanguard of style creation allowed these men to claim power in their own way (not unlike Congolese gentlemen – and a few women – or les Sapeurs, Tamagni 2009), which they performed in relation to mapunk and white tourists, but mostly in relation to each other.

The multiplicity of meanings carried by the term African men, and the modes in which these served to draw boundaries around imagined gendered selves in diverse contexts, became all the more clear in debates that called for particularly clear boundaries. No debate sparked sharper boundaries among the young men in Mathare than discussions on homosexuality or, more specifically, lesbianism.

Lesbians: the ultimate other?
Malik and the other Ruff Skwad gang members sat around a wooden table, eating meat and drinking beer in a bar near the football field in May 2011. After discussing football at
length, the discussion suddenly turned to sex and, to my surprise, lesbians. A friend of Malik said: “Lesbianism is wrong, it cannot happen...it is like masturbation. It’s like waste.” I asked for clarification and Malik explained:

When girls do like that, we can beat them. It is not natural. Maybe some are hurt by men or they don’t know men but we are here for them...they don’t need to do that to each other, they need to be with a man first. Then they will know they don’t need each other. It can’t happen in ghetto, it does not exist here, never, and if it is there we can beat them. I have never seen it and it will never happen here, it is something for mapunk!

Interestingly, a few weeks earlier, Malik had told me about a friend, a young woman in her early twenties, who had come out to him and confessed that she had met a woman who was now her “boyfriend”, as Malik put it. During that discussion, Malik revealed to me that he respected her choice, even if he did not understand it, although he later shared that they had stopped being friends because he could “not accept who she has become.” He confided in me that he no longer knew how to act in relation to her, and that he felt awkward and out of place every time she met him to hang out together.

Lesbians, to these young men, embodied a crude denial of the adage that African men are providers and heads of the household, which are held dearly by most young men in Nairobi’s ghettos. The tenacity of the notion of the provider was related to a fear they shared of becoming superfluous in relation to the women in their lives, which was a theme that was revisited over and over again in my conversations with these men. This fear also guided their negotiation of dominant discourses on alternative sexualities and practices, and their positioning as African men. This is illustrated above when Malik's friend described lesbianism as a “waste.” With this term he was not referring to lesbians, but to himself and the other men who are supposedly excluded when women engage in sexual relationships with other women. As Malik clearly brought out above, lesbians were constructed as victims who may have been hurt by men or had not yet ‘been with’ a man. This ties in with the dominant belief that constructs same-sex boarding schools as sites where girls are ‘introduced’ to lesbian sex (see also Kweyu 2010), whereas, strikingly, boys at same-sex boarding schools are hardly ever mentioned in this debate. A majority of young men from the Nairobi ghettos considered homosexuality in general, but lesbianism in particular, as ‘un-African’ and part of a punk lifestyle. By calling same-sex practices and identities “something for mapunk”, they pinpointed these as practices that youths in wealthier urban regions had copied from the West. I asked Malik why young men in Nairobi ghettos talked so much about lesbians and not about gay men:

Gay men do not exist for us. When they would be in ghetto we would beat them, laugh at them, eeh they could get killed. Gay men are worse than lesbians, much worse. We don’t talk about them. It’s disgusting what they do,
can you imagine? Lesbians are women, that is different but they can't ignore us, you don't need to be a lesbian in ghetto. There are so many guys!

These young men clearly regarded gay men with great contempt, and thinking about them triggered intense and potentially dangerous emotions. Lesbians were eyed more with fear, and the emotions triggered by the mere possibility of lesbianism seemed to pose an even greater challenge. Even when asked directly about gay men, Malik and other young men quickly guided the conversation back to discuss lesbians. This reveals the levels of anxiety with which these men regarded lesbians. It was especially striking to hear how much Malik insisted that "[Lesbianism] can't happen in ghetto, it does not exist", and later on "it will never happen." He even threatened that he and his friends could use violence if this nonetheless occurred. Gay men, as pointed out by Malik, ran the risk of being killed, whereas lesbians seemed to be more in danger of being raped and beaten. The repetition and emphasis on lesbians, as expressed by Malik and his friends, are clear evidence of their deep anxiety that such women may become more visible in the ghetto. In the second interview excerpt, Malik even said, almost in panic, that "they [women] can't ignore us." Many young men from Nairobi’s ghettos seemed to fear lesbians because they were frightened of becoming entirely redundant in relation to the women in their immediate surroundings. This fear shaped their social navigation struggles and their attachment to the role of the provider. In the first interview excerpt above, Malik said: "They don't need each other", and perhaps meant to add 'because we need them.'

‘Lesbophobia’ among many of the young men in the Nairobi ghettos was thus greatly informed by the anxieties they endured over their increasingly insecure position as men, especially in relation to the women in their lives. These anxieties were most acutely felt with regard to their wealthier counterparts because, although they looked like them, they seemed to have it all. Malik again lashed out to mapunk at the end of the above excerpt when he said that women "don't need to be a lesbian in ghetto. There are so many guys!" Here he again evoked the counter position of maboyz as 'real African men' versus feminine, fake, Westernised, soft and, perhaps even gay, mapunk. Accordingly, their marked emphasis on lesbian practices and identities while using the word punk communicated to mapunk that they were actually not real men or, more specifically, not really African men. Their condemnation of same-sex practices and identities perhaps had less to do with lesbians, and more with the actual effects of the dominant discourse on masculinities in these young men's lives. Using lesbian bodies to position themselves in relationships of power with wealthier, male counterparts shows that growing anxieties over manhood led to stronger articulations of masculinities versus femininities in their enactments of the ghetto pride position. It is thus not unthinkable that these anxieties may result in more violence against allegedly lesbian women, even if the ultimate other to young ghetto men continues to be most profoundly embodied by their wealthy counterparts.7

---

7 See also Lock Swar 2012 and Morrissey 2013 for more on lesbophobia, homosexuality, same sex practices and identifications, as well as their putative un-Africanness and anxieties over manhood in South Africa.
Talking swag

Sheng was key to the performance of swag and enactments of ghetto pride among young ghetto men, and a prime example of how these youths turned a space of possible marginalisation into a one of potential power, albeit space and time bound.

Sheng has been the focus of research for two decades, yet no consensus has so far been achieved in terms of whether it can be categorised as urban slang, a dialect of Kiswahili or a language on its own (Mazrui 1995; Githiora 2002; Githinji 2006, 2008; Bosire 2006). It is enough to state here that Sheng is based mostly on Kiswahili in terms of grammar. It also borrows and plays with words (turning them around, clipping them and so on) from Kiswahili and English (hence the acronym Swahili-English: Sheng), and from many different Kenyan vernaculars and international languages (such as German or Norwegian). At times, Sheng speakers even invent entirely new words (Bosire 2006; Githinji 2006). It has been claimed that Sheng developed in informal settlements in Nairobi Eastlands (where Mathare is located) as early as the 1930s (Mazrui 1995), and has long since spread to other urban areas in East Africa. Sheng, however, rose to its current status of the dominant youth language in Kenyan urban centres, and even in some rural regions, during the 1990s. It has now become such a mainstream language that corporations (e.g., Mutonya 2008) and even politicians (e.g., Mutinda 2011) use it to appeal to young Kenyans, both poor and rich, and urban and rural.

During the early 1990s, the majority of youths in Mathare spoke hardly any English, as most of them had dropped out of high school or had not even finished their primary education. Moreover, most had parents who conversed with them in either Kiswahili or a vernacular language. Among themselves, however, these young people spoke Sheng. In contrast, youths from more affluent areas spoke English at school, at home with their parents and, most importantly, with their friends. A major shift took place at the close of the 1990s when local Hip Hop collectives like Kalamashaka, which were part of the ghetto Hip Hop crew Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, emerged rapping in Sheng (Mose 2013:119-120; Samper 2004; Wa Mungai 2008). Their popularity prompted the youths in wealthier neighbourhoods to increasingly infuse their English with Sheng words taken from their lyrics, and this type of Sheng was called Engsh (as it was based on Kenyan English mixed with Sheng words). In the past decade, Sheng has become the marker of popular youth cultures among young people with very different class and ethnic backgrounds. Partly, this has been driven by the rise of both ever more Hip Hop collectives from the sprawling Nairobi ghettos that all rap in Sheng and the way artists and groups from other areas took up Sheng to display swag. The division between Sheng and Engsh nevertheless persisted, and youths from the ghettos continued to take pride in speaking a type of Sheng that young people from wealthier neighbourhoods found hard to understand, at least according to their counterparts from the ghettos. In more recent times, youths in Mathare have continued to dub the Sheng spoken by mapunk as Engsh, even if the Sheng spoken by these youths was less speckled with English words than ever before. Nevertheless, the Sheng spoken by mapunk was always considered by ghetto youths to still lag miles behind the 'real and deep' Sheng that was constantly under construction in the ghettos. As such, Sheng
continued to be firmly located within ghetto youth cultures, and so this language was one of the ways in which, especially, young men from ghettos claimed power in relation to wealthier youths, even if ephemerally. Malik explained:

Each ghetto, we have our own Sheng, our own words. You can hear if someone is from this place or this place, just by the way he speaks Sheng. Even in Mathare, you see, Sheng in Kosovo has many Kikuyu words, because we are Kikuyu, but 4B has many Luo words. Like that. Our Sheng is deep, very deep. Mapunk cannot understand, ha ha ha, never, they float (a way of saying in Sheng that someone does not understand something), ha ha mafala ('fools' in Sheng). Sheng is pure ghetto, and we come up with new words, all the time. You see when you come back next time, again, I have to teach you more so you can understand new Sheng. Every time you come you have to learn again.

The binary between Sheng and Engsh reflects the putative dichotomy between notions of real and fake manhood imagined by young ghetto men, and resonates with the alleged binary between the hustler (mjanja) and the fool (fala) explored in the previous chapter. Mapunk, as Malik illustrated repeatedly in the above, were also often referred to as mafala. In this sense, ufala accentuates the ostensible lack of street smartness (ujanjess in Sheng) among youths from wealthier areas.

As noted, at the core of performing swag (enacted, for instance, by dressing in a stylish manner and talking deep Sheng) stood the ghetto pride position, yet the question remains as to how viable this position was for young ghetto men in their attempts to claim power. Malik often referred to notions of ghetto pride, even during vicissitudes marked by extreme stress.

One night, he was persuaded by some of his friends to join a gang who had planned a hijack on a City Hoppa bus (a privately-owned, large public transport bus) in the city centre. During the robbery, they attempted to take phones and other valuables from the passengers, but, unfortunately for them, one happened to be an armed policeman in plain clothes who instantly started shooting at them. They all fled on foot in different directions, except for one of them: Malik's best friend was shot dead on the spot. While narrating this incident to me right after it had happened, he shared the following:

Here [in Mathare] we are hustlers, we don't belong to the city, we belong here, this is our university. There is nothing for us out there, we have to survive, to hustle... here. I can't go to tao ('city centre' in Sheng) and feel like I belong there. I can try to fit, but I know I don't fit. I have to be rada ('alert' in Sheng), not like mapunk who belong there. You know, I am proud to be ghetto, we are together. I have learned everything here. But you feel pain, why do we have to live like this? We can just be chased like that and you don't know. Where can we go? And we see the big houses just here...
in Muthaiga (a very wealthy neighbourhood near Mathare Valley). We can’t reach that, but I will, one day. I will drive my own car.

At first glance, Malik constructed a sense of belonging that seemed to affirm the dominant subject position of the ghetto boy, and which was informed by the actual dangers involved in venturing outside the ghetto. Nevertheless, he also expressed pride in being ghetto, a hustler, a mjanja. Later in our talk he said: "The ghetto is our mother, it raised us. We are proud of that." This shows that the position of ghetto pride entailed new possibilities and new identifications by constantly re-evaluating what they imagined as ghettoness. Many of my research participants identified with the hustler and conveyed this sentiment of ghetto pride, but also often felt powerless, which was a sentiment that some considered to be contradictory when it came to enacting the role of hustler.

These expressions of ghetto pride marked a shift from constructions of belonging that I have often encountered among older generations in Mathare. Many older residents I interviewed and worked with over the years negotiated the dominant discourse on slums and the subject position of ‘slum dweller’ (a common term in the dominant discourse to denote people living in ghettos – see also UN-HABITAT 2008) by imagining a sense of belonging based on temporality. People in Mathare, to them, did not live in this ghetto to stay there (see Chapter 1). Even if these older people had lived in Mathare for decades, they never seemed to articulate a sense of belonging like the newer generations of young men (and also young women) who were born and raised in the ghetto. During our numerous discussions and debates, Malik and his friends often emphasised the qualities of ghettoness, which they, tellingly, defined using an idiom that was similar to when they denoted local ideas of manhood, namely being street smart, together, real and tough. From time to time, Malik even toasted his friends with a beer in his hands by saying: “We survive ghetto? We survive anywhere!” Malik and many men like him imagined the ghetto as ‘a university’ and ‘a mother’, in other words a nostalgic space where young men learned about important values (such as togetherness) and the realities of life, but also a space that should also be left at the right time. These men often opposed it to the alleged, cushioned and fake life in affluent areas, and as such seemed to transform their jealousy and frustrations into self-pride and a deep contempt for mapunk.

This all suggests that the notion of ghetto pride allowed Malik and other young men to carve out a space in which they were able to take pride in what was widely taken to be a derogatory subject position, thus turning the label ghetto boy into a sobriquet. This reveals how alternative positions of manhood (marked by hustling and ghetto pride) may help local young men to claim power in certain contexts. Using the Sheng term maboyz or wasee (saying thing such as wasee wa ghetto wako hardcore: ‘boys from the ghetto are tough’ in Sheng) to refer to young men from the ghetto underscores this. The terms maboyz and wasee (not to be confused with wazee, which means senior men in Kiswahili) can be understood as a play on the stereotype of the ghetto boy. Yet, the viability of this temporally and spatially bound alternative position needs to be scrutinised. Conjuring up a sense of ghetto pride and positioning oneself as a hustler in the face of enduring hardship
and feeling stuck as men often appeared to be more of a fleeting escape than a viable alternative subject position. In private, Malik (and other young men I worked with) expressed great despair about their lives and social positions.

In the end, all of the men I worked with not only wanted to leave the gang, but the ghetto as well. In this vein, the ghetto to them also continued to be a space of transition (from the rural area to the city) and, ultimately, displacement (when transition never took place). The difference, however, between their expressions of belonging and those of their parents and grandparents centred on notions of ghetto pride (see Chapter 1). Having said this, leaving the ghetto was also conceptualised by them as a key step in their social navigation trajectories. Malik said: "I see my friends, they have land and houses, they move outside the ghetto. I am still stuck, I have nothing to show." Interestingly, Malik did not live in Kosovo, but rented a house in Kariobangi. Nevertheless, he perceived himself to be stuck in the ghetto. Some of his friends had been able to buy a piece of land through the money they earned by dealing drugs, and Malik felt he was behind with "his plan", as he put it; he had lost his family and did not have a steady income. His prospects of leaving the ghetto and establishing himself as a senior man were growing increasingly dim as the years passed by. This led him to continually contemplate a return to the gang, although he never did; going back would denote a serious fall in social status. This shows that Malik, and many men like him, invested a lot in maintaining their status as a junior man, even if this meant fewer resources with which to achieve their main ambition of becoming senior men.

A cool mask
As well as clothing styles and talking deep Sheng, swag in Mathare denoted many other distinct bodily practices. Ghetto pride, which was at the centre of ghetto swag, was often performed by putting on a cool 'mask', not unlike the cool front or cool pose often displayed by African-American young men in inner-city ghettos (Majors and Mancini Billson 1993). Young ghetto men faced police brutality, all types of violence from fellow ghetto residents and humiliating, even dehumanising, living conditions day in day out, and it was striking to observe the lengths they went to in order to show each other that they were impervious to it all. A cool mask to them implied a strong mind, and helped to fend off danger, because it was thought to communicate control and power. Yet it was not only young ghetto men who were heavily engaged in seeming to be impermeable in relation to each other when encountering predicaments; Mathare residents (both men and women) in general did not easily disclose information to each other about private matters, let alone express emotion in public. Many reasons contributed to the level of secrecy with which people here guarded their private life in relation to each other, but the fact that Mathare residents were cramped together in tiny living spaces no doubt exacerbated their urge to keep their thoughts and feelings close to their chest. The public sphere was everywhere and competition for resources was high. Consequently, showing no emotion and hiding feelings and information from each other were ways to stay in control of one's own life course, at least to some extent, and claim status with regard to others. In this vein, it had a
similar function as fashion: it showed success, power and control in situations that were ripe with the opposite. Most importantly, it fended off gossip and its destructive properties.

Young men in particular were very engaged in masking feelings, as to them it had become a distinctive way of demonstrating manhood and expressing ghetto pride. A cool mask, however, was not just about demonstrating, and so claiming, control, but also about emotionally protecting oneself, as both Blue, a Ruff Skwad gang member, and Kingi explained to me. In March 2011, Kosovo had been without water for five weeks, and the situation was almost unbearable as effluent from sewers flooded the small streets and even entered houses. People were forced to wake up at four AM to line up on time to fetch water from the other side of the ghetto, and growing numbers of children became unwell. I asked Blue if he and others felt angry about this situation, as I was struck by the ostensible apathy with which he and other gang members seemed to respond. He replied: "We are used, we [young men] can't be angry... we can't think about that, we can't lose focus." Using Kingi’s precise words, Blue ended this narration by saying: "If you lose focus you die." In the previous chapter, Kingi had already alluded to the way that he, and many men like him, coped with stress. When his cousin was murdered by the police, anger and pain visibly registered on his face for a brief moment, but he soon managed to put his cool mask on again and close the "door in my head", as he said, to "get on with life." He told me: "If bad things happen I push it to the side of my head", and he kept himself busy all day every day, because he feared "doing nothing." Kingi said: "Doing nothing will open doors in my head and make me remember all the bad things that have happened." He was certain that he would not be able to handle these emotions. This tells us that many young ghetto men were possibly guided by a fear that the force of emotions, once let out, could turn on them, consume them, and would thwart their ambitions to become senior men. Accordingly, the men who demonstrated control were respected and taken as wajanja, whereas those who seemingly succumbed to such pressures (such as visible alcoholics) were mocked and taken as mafala ('fools' in Sheng).

Having a cool mask was ranked as the most important aspect of performing swag, and stood above clothing style, talking deep Sheng and other swag practices. On the face of it, both Kingi and Blue looked rather unremarkable, but they were or had been unofficial leaders of their respective gangs. In contrast, Malik at first glance seemed to embody swag. He did, however, lack a cool mask; he invested greatly in trying to hide his pain, yet he never fully succeeded and was constantly engaged in other modes of swag (such as going out and dressing stylish) to compensate for this and still gain the respect of his peers. On many occasions, I observed how he changed his facial expressions, his posture and his Sheng, even the tone of his voice, when we met friends while walking in Kosovo: he would stretch himself up and stand on his tiptoes, broaden his shoulders, push his chest out and smile, showing his teeth, while pulling his chin up and moving his head a little backwards, as if to fend off an attack. The transformation was so obvious because when he and I walked together he normally did so with his shoulders down, his arms dangling alongside his lanky body and his back hollow. He enacted this hyper masculine posture as part of swag, yet he could not hide his weary eyes and soft voice. Kingi, Blue and Malik were all
considered, and considered themselves, to be very handsome young men, and they all took care of how they dressed. Nevertheless, Malik sported a more elaborate look, and never wore the same outfit for two days in a row. Most young men with some means in Mathare aspired to and evinced a style that resembled that of Malik. Kingi and Blue were exceptions to the rule in multiple ways. Dressed rather inconspicuously, they gained respect not by showing success, but by being successful.

Changing times, changing perspectives
In the previous chapter, I described how Kingi had been able to leave the One Touch distilling gang after a long period of balancing multiple income-generating activities. I often discussed with him the predicaments that Malik had encountered in his life in an attempt to comprehend why he did not seem to be able to establish a more sustainable source of income, despite having more resources at his disposal than Kingi ever had. Kingi explained to me that he thought young men today did not want vocational training like *jua kali*, but aspired to, what he dubbed, “white collar jobs”. This trend, according to Kingi, was to a large extent the result of the growing accessibility to internet training courses in Mathare since 2000 through Nairobits (a computer training college for youths from economically marginalised areas), whereas unemployment, and so competition in these sectors in particular, has been on the rise ever since. Kingi clearly spoke from the position of an older man given that he was almost 10 years older than Malik. Kingi also regarded Malik as spoilt, as he still had both of his parents to fall back on. His thoughts about Malik first stemmed from the way Kingi felt about his own problematic childhood and his pride with regard to his current social position, which he took as a personal achievement. However, many other young men also mentioned the year 2000 as a way to pinpoint what to them seemed to be a shift in opportunities and aspirations that had, according to them, had far-reaching ripple effects on cultural expressions and the processes of gang formation in Mathare.

Kingi had come of age before the year 2000, whereas Malik had only been a 12-year-old boy at the start of the new millennium. Both described an increase in the mobility of youths from the ghetto to the city, and more access to income-generating activities and to (social) media (TV, film and internet) from the early 2000s onwards. Their analyses were spot on. Since 2000, Kenya’s economy has been on the rise (GoK 2011), and has only experienced a few periodic setbacks, such as during the aftermath of the political violence early 2008. In the period 1998-2007, informal employment opportunities increased nationwide, despite the sharp fall in formal employment (Wamuthenya 2010a, 2010b) that followed widespread privatisation and which caused a decline in public sector jobs. More young people from the ghetto were able to find temporary work at, for instance, roadside workshops and construction sites, or as domestic workers, which were all sectors that serviced the increasingly wealthy elite. Economic growth only structurally benefitted a few elites (Action Aid 2010), but in their wake many informal workers took advantage of the day-labour opportunities their success provided. Construction, for example, boomed in Nairobi, and a growing number of untrained young men worked as day labourers at the
sites that emerged. At the same time, hawking and petty theft, which were two major sources of income for young people during the 1990s, were increasingly curbed from 2002 onwards as a result of successful attempts by consecutive governments to bar street children and hawkers from the city centre (see also Ruteere & Pommerolle 2003: 598-9). More jobs in the informal sector, including construction sites, denoted more options for ghetto youths. However, as noted, government interventions reduced opportunities for them elsewhere. What is more, soaring unemployment rates in the formal sector caused a downward pressure from educated onto uneducated youths in the informal sector. As a consequence, the latter did not benefit from the growth in the informal sector as much as their educated counterparts. For instance, I have met several matatu drivers with a diploma in electrical engineering. Overall, growing opportunities (however minimal) in the informal sector did lead to more spatial, virtual and social mobility among ghetto youths when compared to the 1990s. Yet, these opportunities were often highly temporal. Raised expectations as a result of more mobility among young people from the ghetto without long-term prospects did, however, enhance feelings of being stuck among many of them.

Kingi identified the arrival of Nairobits in Mathare as a landmark moment. During the 1990s, Mathare was largely the domain of one NGO, namely the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA). MYSA is an organisation that reaches out to children and young people in Nairobi through sport, and it also provides them with HIV-AIDS education, talent development and scholarships. I will explore the layered and highly problematic relationship between this NGO and Mathare’s residents in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to state that prior to its gradual expansion to 15 other neighbourhoods in Nairobi in the late 1990s, MYSA was the dominant NGO in Mathare through which many other initiatives often operated. Nairobits also started its work through the vast infrastructure of established groups and offices of MYSA, but soon became independent and began to work directly with local CBOs. More NGOs followed suit, and the trend of an increased NGO presence in Mathare corresponded with the increase in the presence of NGOs nationally (Brass 2010; Kameri-Mbote 2000). This sparked a rise in job opportunities for ghetto youths. Many youths who had been trained by Nairobits, for instance, have found jobs either as trainers there or at partner CBOs. Accordingly, the growing NGO presence in Mathare also contributed to greater spatial and social mobility among young people in the ghetto. However, most job opportunities in the NGO sector were almost exclusively available to youths with a high school diploma, which increased the rift between youths from low-income and lower-income backgrounds in Mathare experienced by working gang members. I will return to this rift in the next chapter, but this too added to feelings of ‘being stuck’ among gang members, most of whom did not have the necessary qualifications.

As a result of the said changes, ghetto youths broadened their horizons, which shaped new reflections on their own positioning in society and future aspirations. Many factors contributed to changes in lifestyle, social horizons (Vigh 2006) and popular cultures among the young men and women in Mathare over the past decade, who were increasingly confronted with luxurious lifestyles through the internet, music, video clips and, especially, films. Malik described this as “shopping for ideas.” I have already mentioned that he loved
to browse for fashion ideas on the internet on his phone, and he also enjoyed going to
shopping malls near the Maasai markets where he worked to look at shop windows. At the
same time, he also expressed great frustration over the fact that he could not "reach that
life", and was often shocked to see the price tags on the garments displayed in these
windows. He explained how he thought that "growing exposure to majuu", as he dubbed it,
impinged on the relationships between men and women in the ghettos:

I tell you why so many young men in ghetto are thugs, highway robbers and
conmen. You know, these young men risk their lives, so many are shot
dead...and you know why? Because of girls. Girls in Mathare are so expensive.
We have to get money so they like us, ha ha, they need money for hair, for
clothes, for toe nails, ha ha. We want to take them to town, girls these days,
they like luxury, not like before... now they want to be treated like a movie.
So, we rob, we steal so we can get money to get girls. Better I die trying... than
bring nothing home.

The frustrations expressed by Malik here again underline his anxieties in relation to
women in general, and his girlfriend in particular, and he also added the dimension of
changing horizons and aspirations.

Malik made an intertextual reference to 50 Cent's famous album "Get Rich or Die
Tryin" when he said "better I die trying." Many young ghetto men often rephrased this
slogan as "get rich or try dying" to better reflect the harsh realities of their lives. Kingi had
a point when he said that Malik's generation faced more problems, not despite more
spatial, virtual and social mobility, but because of it. Increased mobility or "exposure", as
the ghetto youths termed it, triggered new perspectives and ambitions without the actual
means to achieve them. Young men like Malik invested many resources in presenting
themselves as trendy and successful. Indeed, they often diverted funds needed for rent,
food and hospital bills to this end. Malik, for example, walked around with excruciating
toothache for three months, but bought new clothes and went to clubs throughout this
period. The standards by which success was measured among young ghetto men and
women have changed drastically over the past ten years. According to Kingi, it seemed to
be more difficult for Malik and other current gang members than it had ever been for him
to live up to such standards when he was young. Upholding the status of a junior man in
current times meant investing more resources than ever before, which were resources that
could not be used to realise their ambition of establishing themselves as senior men.
Balancing such social navigation struggles – gaining the respect of peers and pursuing
senior manhood – became increasingly difficult for most young ghetto men. In Kingi's time,
these trajectories had been mutually reinforcing and, as such, much more intertwined,
whereas nowadays one increasingly thwarted the other for many. This applied all the more
to men like Malik, who felt utterly insecure about their social position as men with regard
to their families, feeling the need to compensate for this by engaging ever more deeply in
bonding-practices between peers, using all their time and money in doing so. This also
applied to the current alcohol distillers; although their swag performances involved different “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988), which were shaped by different levels of income and mobility, they also invested a lot of resources in maintaining a high status as junior men in relation to their peers.

Malik’s best friend Blue seemed to be an exception to this rule, and taking a closer look at his highly successful trajectory out of the gang will give better insight into the factors that contributed to success and failure in more recent times.

Drugs dealers become ghetto farmers
Blue was a close friend of Malik and an unofficial leader of the Ruff Skwad gang. He was also the main initiator of several collective business ventures aiming to help members leave the gang. As it turned out, he was the only one from the Ruff Skwad gang to benefit from these collective ventures in the long run; he managed to carefully apply the skills he had acquired during the rise and fall of these businesses in building his private projects, which have become increasingly lucrative over the years. At present, he is the proud and single owner of the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub, a chicken project and an illegal electricity business. So, why did the collective businesses implemented by the Ruff Skwad gang fail, and why was Blue able to successfully develop similar businesses by himself in the same period?

On a cold August afternoon in 2008, Blue approached me in dark blue overalls and gumboots instead of his usual customised Manchester United shirt (proudly stating Baba Jackson – father of Jackson – on the back) and baggy blue jeans. He wanted to show me something and told me to follow him. We reached a corner, and I suddenly saw an open space where more than 30 pigs were rolling and grunting in a big puddle of waste where the sewer ended up in the river. Some of them were enormous, others only a few days old. Another Ruff Skwad member emerged covered in dung from what turned out to be the pigpen. He was cleaning out the sties by scooping up the waste with a big shovel and dumping it straight in the river next to where the open sewer ended up. The crushing stench of pig dung, rotting garbage and human waste clinging together and forming small floating islands in the river did not seem to bother him. Blue laughed when he saw my perplexed expression. "We got this place by the Chief, we bought pigs, and it is good money, but I have another surprise." He turned me around and I saw two beautiful, fat Friesian cows eating a big pile of green grass. I laughed out loud. This was a surprise; these drug dealers had started a ghetto farm amidst open sewers and piles of garbage in an area that had the highest population density in the country. Later, I discovered that many gangs and youth groups had started similar farms in other ghetto villages in Mathare (and in other ghetto areas in Nairobi) with varying degrees of success.

Later that day, we met the group of 12 Ruff Skwad gang members who had registered as a CBO using the gang’s name a few months earlier. Malik and Blue explained to me that only older gang members participated because, as Blue related, most of the younger ones did not want to comply with the rules of weekly contributions. According to Blue, they did yet not feel any social pressure to leave the gang, and were still “just enjoying
life” as bachelors (*kuraha* in Sheng), even if most were married and had children. Nevertheless, the older men, through this official registration as a CBO, had received a certificate that allowed them to open an account at a local bank. The men then started saving money, following the example of the myriad savings-groups set up by women in Mathare. The Ruff Skwad version of these groups used its weekly savings to buy the pigs and cows to start the ghetto farm. After my visit to the farm that day, the *chama* members asked me to help them create a business plan, and we sat down in the pub and calculated expenditure and profits for the rest of the afternoon. We concluded that the ghetto farm was currently breaking even, but could be profitable in three months time.

All 12 of the participants in the Ruff Skwad savings-group were eager to make the farm profitable enough for them to leave dealing drugs and the gang, although this unfortunately never happened. Soon after our meeting, one of the cows developed sores all over its body and stopped producing milk. The young men lacked the expertise to properly gauge the severity of the animal’s condition in time, and it died before they could have it checked out by a local veterinarian. Unfortunately, there were further setbacks when a couple of fully-grown pigs were stolen a few months after the cow died, and again a few months later when the second cow also died of an untreated infection. Furthermore, when I returned in July 2009, the swine flu epidemic had just become global news (WHO 2009). In response, Mathare’s residents en masse turned away from eating pork, and neighbours had forced the Ruff Skwad gang members to kill their pigs because of a fear of contamination. Lastly, goats generally roamed free inside the ghetto and repeatedly destroyed the vegetable gardens-in-sacks and young trees that the Ruff Skwad savings-group members had planted near the river to boost the dwindling farm. When I returned to carry out fieldwork in August 2010, the farm had been reduced to a single young cow (a calf of one of the deceased cows) that had not yet started to produce milk and a few goats.

Blue contemplated: "We try, of course we try. There is no option, you can’t lose focus, you die. But most of these guys they lack commitment, they don’t believe in business." After all these setbacks, the majority of the savings-group members lost interest and stopped contributing money, time and energy to the farm. This led to tensions within the group, because the others did not want to lose the money they had invested and were set on holding on to what was left. They argued that more effort was required to revive what was left and hope for a better return in the future. The savings-group fell apart over this issue, which had ripple effects throughout the gang. Some of the members who wanted to continue with the farm worked in the same company (this was a set of two to six dealers who worked for a particular boss) as members who had left the savings-group, whereas trust was mandatory for the work they did. A few angry words and blows were exchanged, until Blue stood up as a leader and decided to close the farm, sell what was left and divide the money to share the losses equally. The gang did not have a clearly identified leader, but during moments like this it was generally Blue who took on a leadership role and was accepted as such by the other members. Some participants did not agree with his decision, but they accepted what Blue did because they also realised that tensions began to affect their work, and they saw that reviving the farm had little to no chance of succeeding.
Between business and reputation

The reasons why the farm project eventually failed were not only tied to an accumulation of setbacks. After talking to Blue and the other participants at length, I discovered that a few members had hired help to work for them. This had not been a secret, but was frowned on by the other members and they had therefore not mentioned it during our meeting and it was not included in the business plan. Yet this practice had a major impact on progress and business returns. According to Blue, many of the setbacks could have been avoided if all of the participants in the savings-group had committed themselves to the farm. Some problems, he said, had been left unattended because the hired help did not have the knowledge or the vested interest to see the farm succeed. Indeed, most of them had been notorious alcoholics who had cleaned the sties and fed the cows for a small stipend to buy chang’aa. They had thus been sloppy, consuming much of the daily profits. Blue alluded to the practice of hiring workers to do their job when he stated above that “these guys lack commitment” and “they don’t believe in business.” The participants who had hired help to work for them explained to me that farming was either for women or older men, not for young ghetto men like them. They were interested in the money, but were afraid to corrode their carefully crafted reputations by doing the work. They told me outright that they were afraid that it might harm their standing (title or rank in Sheng) with regard to friends and other groups of young men in the ghetto. Maintaining a status as a junior man thus denoted diverting some of the resources these men could have used to build the farm, and as such seemed to undermine their strategies to leave the gang.

At the same time, Blue had developed several highly successful ventures all by himself. Strikingly, even Malik, his best friend, had not been aware of his success, and this again illustrates how far people went to protect their privacy. In May 2012, Blue, Malik and I went to a Somali restaurant in the city centre, because Blue wanted to discuss something with Malik and me in private. Like many other research participants, he never talked about his business or private life in the ghetto, and preferred to organise our interviews in public restaurants outside it. People often gave me two reasons as to why they preferred to keep information close to their chests. The first was their fear of witchcraft, and they told me that if the wrong person got hold of information about their plans and possible social and economic success, he or she might interfere by “placing juju”8 (‘witchcraft’ in Sheng), by which they meant casting a spell. The second reason pertained to a widely held fear that others would use information about possible success to thwart it out of jealousy and boost their own business by, for instance, informing the police about an illegal business venture. Feeling safe enough to talk in the noisy restaurant, Blue took my pen and notebook and began to draw a house. “Next time you come, I will house you, and this will be your room.” He was indicating one of the many rooms in what turned out to be a sketch of the stone house he was building in Ruai, an emerging neighbourhood on the eastern outskirts of Nairobi. He had already paid for the land and had just finished constructing the

---

8 The term juju in Sheng is inspired by the term ‘juju’ in West Africa, where it has many different connotations, including medicine and witchcraft (see also Meyer 1999: 197)
foundations. I gaped at him while quickly calculating that all of this work had already cost him over a million Kenyan Shillings (approx. 10,000 Euros). "Next time you come, I will not be working *grouo*, but I will be my own boss." Malik looked equally stunned and whispered: "You even have a gym, ha ha." For six long years, Blue had carefully invested the money he had made by dealing drugs in buying the pub and starting an electricity distribution centre. He had then used his profits to purchase a piece of land outside the ghetto. Both Malik and I were very impressed by Blue’s perseverance and commitment, but also amazed by the businesses he had set up and the wealth he had been able to garner without even his best friend Malik knowing about it.

Despite earning increasing amounts of money, Blue had stayed inside Kosovo and, like Kingi in the previous chapter, had worked day and night to boost his businesses. Also like Kingi, Blue had been an informal leader of his gang. He was not, however, related to the drug bosses and so was not helped as Kingi had been by Shosho Kingi. Yet Blue had been known as a ‘highway robber’ (an emic term to describe people who hijack cars and steal from houses outside the ghetto) before he had become a drug dealer. In contrast to thieves who stole inside the ghetto, highway robbers and bank robbers were respected for their level of skill and courage and for the potential high returns. Accordingly, Blue did not have to invest extra resources in building his reputation in the way that Malik had felt compelled to do so, because he already had proven, at least to his peers, that he was a highly ranked *maboy* (single for *maboyz*, 'young ghetto man' in Sheng). Moreover, Blue had invested some of the remaining profits from his past as a robber into building his businesses, which was start-up capital that most of the other Ruff Skwad gang members lacked. Furthermore, his reputation had helped him to take bold steps in his businesses, for instance he was not stopped when he took over the electricity business from Mungiki gang members in 2007, because residents feared him.

**Conclusion**

This chapter revealed that drug dealers faced the same struggles to leave the gang as alcohol distillers, even if they earned more money. One of the reasons for this pertains to the ways in which the Ruff Skwad gang members negotiated the dominant discourse on masculinities. The manner many used to take up the alternative subject position of ghetto pride – and an othered wealthy youth in the process – denoted the investment of vast resources in performing *swag*. This greatly shaped their social navigation struggles. Malik's narratives reveal the different layers of how this played out in the lives of many of the wealthier gang members. At first, he went overboard in trying to live up to the role of the provider, almost killing himself in the process. When he lost his position as 'husband' in relation to his girlfriend and, most importantly, as a 'father' to his daughters, he started to compensate for this loss in social status by refocusing on maintaining the position of a junior man in relation to his peers. As a Ruff Skwad gang member, this entailed different and often more expensive technologies of the self than was common among the alcohol distillers. Redrawing his trajectory in response to changing circumstances thus included a diversion of all of his resources to enacting the junior manhood position, hampering his
ambition to achieve senior manhood in the process. This shows that many of these men were engaged in different social navigation trajectories at the same time, highlighting the need to analyse how these different struggles related to one another. Balancing the struggle of upholding the junior man role in the moment, while pursuing senior manhood in the near future, became increasingly difficult for young ghetto men in recent times as a result of higher aspirations and bleaker prospects. The ghetto pride position thus became harder to maintain in the face of these grim tides, which compelled many to invest ever more resources in adhering to this subdominant masculine ideal. However, this again added to feelings of ‘being stuck’ in the space of the gang.

Malik’s life history represented the dilemmas that many of the Ruff Skwad members I worked with faced. Blue was one of the few exceptions; he did not have to invest many resources in obtaining and maintaining his reputation as a junior man, as he had already built a name for himself as a successful highway robber. This past had also given him the resources to kick-start several of his business ventures. In addition, his cool mask and leadership qualities, which were traits he shared with Kingi, allowed him to maintain a strong social position with regard to his peers. As a consequence, he was able to focus fully on pursuing his ambition of establishing himself as a senior man. This shows that it was important to analyse the way the different ‘technologies of the self’ that constituted swag were appraised by young men in performing ghetto pride as part of their social navigation. For instance, a cool mask was valued more than clothing styles. This also gives the reader an idea of why and how different the social navigation trajectories possibly were among similarly positioned men, whereas all of these men held onto a shared social horizon, namely becoming senior men.

How Blue was connected to local authorities, and how this helped him in his own social navigation struggle, only gradually became clear to me during my fieldwork. I take this up in the following chapter when I discuss the tense relationship between gangs and other social groups and authorities in Mathare. The frustrations emanating from feeling stuck in the space of the gang, which was shared by most young ghetto men, impinged heavily on the relationships between gangs and other groups and often led to conflicts and junctures of violence. More specifically, tensions within the intimacy of marriage also played out between groups of women and young men in the public sphere. Conflicts between gang members and their predominantly female bosses have even culminated in full-blown physical clashes, with casualties and the destruction of property on both sides, as the next chapter will show.
CHAPTER 5: 'We are the Community!' Gangs and Other Social Groups and Authorities in Mathare.

Introduction
As explored in the previous chapters, individual members of working gangs faced great difficulties in trying to leave and establish themselves as senior men. This had an impact on their personal well-being and impinged heavily on their individual relationships with wives, girlfriends, other family members and peers. Gangs, however fluid and transient, also engaged in relationships with other, similarly fluid, social groups and authorities. More often than not, interactions and connections between these different groups were fraught with tensions and outbursts of direct acts of violence. The volatile relationships between gangs and other social groups and authorities cannot, however, be separated from the overall perilous relationships between groups, organisations and power structures in Mathare. For instance, women’s groups were often at loggerheads with village elders (a group that was dominated by men) over community projects such as building and managing water taps, and it was not uncommon for such conflicts to result in the bodily harm of the people involved. In contrast to the dominant discourse, which casts gangs as the main perpetrators of direct acts of violence in Nairobi’s ghettos, gangs were, in fact, no more or less prone to violence than other social groups and authorities. All processes and incidents of direct acts of violence should always be considered in the context of how routine violence is experienced by people in the everyday. In approaching experiential levels of such social processes, it is thus crucial to analyse direct acts of violence by including analyses of routine and everyday violence (see Introduction).

This chapter focuses on several conflicts between gangs and other social groups and authorities in Mathare, and aims to go beyond the dominant representation of gangs as sole perpetrators of direct acts of violence in Nairobi’s ghettos. To this end, it explores why and how conflicts between gangs and other groups emerged, and how these were tied to the anxieties over manhood shared by the groups of young gang members involved. Accordingly, this chapter brings out the multiple effects of the shrinking space of young ghetto men in Kenyan society as a whole (see also Vigh 2006:89-116), and how this had a bearing on group relations inside Nairobi’s ghettos. I start this chapter by analysing a standoff between young alcohol gang members and women from a community development organisation over the control of a public toilet. This case provides insight into how tensions within the intimacy of marriage also played out between groups of women and men in the public sphere. It analyses why these young ghetto men claimed to be entitled to manage the toilet for money, and legitimised their claim by invoking popular notions of local belonging and male gender roles. I then proceed to discuss the volatile relationships between gang members and community residents in general by taking a closer look at the attempts of a gang of drug dealers in Kosovo to build stronger ties with the community. This and the previous case show how shared fears of becoming redundant
as men in relation to female family members – and the community at large – influenced relationships between gangs and (groups of) community residents in Mathare.

Like the groups and organisations dominated or led by women, gangs also had strained relationships with NGOs and CBOs in general, especially those run by peers. Below, I analyse a case of drug dealers in Kosovo who protested against a CBO that was managed by a young man from the area, because they felt exploited by this organisation. This case, as well as another in which young men from Kosovo tried to claim local resources, shows why it was difficult for young men to overtly resist restrictive structures and claim power in relation to NGOs, CBOs, the chief, police and, needless to say, the entire justice system. I then continue to discuss why, how and when these young men decided to openly resist dominant powers and were able to claim small victories. I conclude this chapter by describing a case that saw a group of young men not only successfully resist one of the most powerful NGOs in Mathare, but also thrive as an officially registered CBO. All of this will show that most groups of young ghetto men shared anxieties and frustrations about their social positions as men, and that these groups often felt obstructed by groups, authorities and organisations close to them when trying to live up to dominant standards of masculinity. At the same time, this chapter argues that these men were not powerless victims; instead, these groups were incessantly and relentlessly engaged in the negotiation of restrictive power structures. In contrast to dominant representations, group strategies to claim power were not always based on violent confrontations, but also on creatively navigating changing power relations.

Who owns the toilet?
Kira, a 26-year-old mother of a toddler, came back from lunch at two. She took over managing the Manoki public toilet from a young man who had cleaned it and collected the payments from visitors for her when she had gone to eat. Most houses in Mathare did not have indoor plumbing, and so residents relied heavily on public toilets for access to water taps, toilets themselves and bathroom facilities. People paid up to 5 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 0.05 Euros) to visit the toilet or use a bathroom and 2 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 0.02 Euros) for fetching 20 litres of water. When they lacked money – but also at night when venturing outside the house was considered to be too dangerous – people were forced to relieve themselves in small plastic containers or plastic bags. Indeed, Mathare was littered with black plastic bags containing human excrement that were thrown outside the houses at night and were known as the infamous ‘flying toilets’ (Mberu et al. 2013). Then, early in the morning, people usually kicked the bags into the many open sewers snaking through the ghetto.

On this particular day, the early morning rain had flooded the open sewers and turned the small dirt paths of the ghetto into tiny rivers of putrid mud. The morning customers had already soiled the white tiles inside the public toilet with their muddy shoes, and the connecting sewer had started to cough excrement back up, causing some of the toilets to overflow. Kira sighed; sometimes, working at the toilet when it rained felt like a battle against the odds, although she mused that the sewer was giving her more of a
problem today than was normally the case. Kira managed the toilet for the Bondeni Village branch of Muungano wa Wanavijiji (hereafter referred to as Muungano) in Mathare. This was a Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) affiliated federation of the urban poor in Kenya (Bradlow 2011:48). She turned the radio back on and helped a customer heaving a 20-litre jerry can filled with water on her back. When she heard screams, Kira’s first thoughts were that it was the music on the radio, but soon a woman rushing past the toilet warned her that a group of young men were coming wielding crude weapons in their hands and shouting slogans. Kira suddenly heard them chanting: “We are the community.” Alarmed, she immediately called her sister Mama J on her mobile phone. She was one of the leaders of the local Muungano branch, and within minutes a group of women gathered near the toilet to face the approaching mob of angry young men who were bellowing insults and pointing at them with machetes.

Within minutes, the narrow corner of the alleyway that led to the public toilet was packed with people, and angry words soon filled the air. Motion, a One Touch gang member, stepped to the fore and yelled at the top of his lungs: “This is our toilet. You took it from us.” Other young men murmured in approval. Most of the protestors were members of the One Touch and Kiharu gangs that worked at the distilling sites located near the public toilet. A few gang members from Shantit (see map) accompanied them. A particularly angry young man interjected: "Blood will flow in mitaro (sewers in Kiswahili) if we don’t get our toilet back." At that precise moment, sewer water full of human excrement flowed from inside the toilet and reached the shoes and bare feet of the women and men standing on the frontline of the clash. Another young man with a club in his hand laughed bitingly and proclaimed: "You cannot even take care of the toilet, look at it, one small drop [of rain] and the sewer overflows, you do not deserve the toilet, it is ours." Some of the women, and a few older men from Muungano who joined them, shouted back that the men should go back down to the riverside, that the public toilet had been renovated by their organisation, and that they were rightfully managing it. One of the leaders on the side of the young men exclaimed that they should take this matter to the chief, adding with a cunning smile that they were willing to unclog the main sewer that congested the entire toilet, but only if they were paid a substantial fee. Some of the women already suspected that the young men had blocked the toilet on purpose and were outraged by their behaviour.

Mama J told me later that the entire crowd had walked to the chief’s camp on the fringe of the Mathare ghetto to take the issue to him.

We were shocked because the chief ruled in their favour. I don’t know how, he gave us the toilet, but they must have given him something, he was on their side. We had to pay 50 thao (‘thousand’ in Sheng), so we looked everywhere for money. They said ‘we need this money so we can unblock the toilet’, but not to settle the case, because they want the toilet. They said the toilet is theirs, and that they did not have jobs, but they have families, how can they feed their families? That is what they
asked. They said Muungano is run by one family only ha ha ha you know what they mean. They said we are not the community, they are, they are the community and the toilet is for the community, not for us. They said they were born here, but so are we ... why are we not from the community? They said they can fight us, that blood will flow in the mitaro ... after the post-election violence, we take these words very seriously. You can’t ignore them.

Mama J and the other Muungano members, both men and women from Mathare, frantically pulled together pocket change and hidden savings. A few hours later, they were able to present a sum of 15,000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 150 Euros) to the chief, who was asked to pay the young men, settle the case and ask them to unblock the toilet. Even if it was not the amount they had initially demanded, the men reluctantly agreed to accept the money and laid down their weapons. Since then, the Muungano members have been on alert, as they feared a repetition of the clash. In Mama J’s words: “Now they know where to get cash.” This case begs the question of why these young men felt more entitled to manage the public toilet than the predominantly female members of Muungano, and why they were prepared to even resort to violence in their attempt to claim control over it.

Groups and the control of public resources in Mathare
The sense of entitlement shared by the young, male gang members confronting the Muungano women at the Manoki public toilet was partially informed by the history of gangs and their control of public services in Nairobi’s ghettos. The young men who strived to take over the toilet were gang members from different alcohol distilling groups that worked on the Mathare riverbanks close to the Manoki facility. Most of the young protesters had grown up in the Manoki area, and had witnessed a wide array of different gangs (including their own) and youth groups that had alternated in terms of managing the public toilet for income since the mid-1990s.

In 2001, Mungiki gangs took control of Mathare by occupying resources such as the Manoki public toilet. Within a year, these gangs not only controlled all of the public toilets in Bondeni Village, but also all of the water points and electricity connections, exacting a ‘security-fee’ from each house, bar, business and shop. In this way, the Mungiki gang members collected astronomical sums of money that mostly flowed back to their leaders. As a result, many young men (and a few women) in Mathare believed that becoming a member of such a gang would give them access to multiple economic opportunities that were previously out of reach for most. The strong Kikuyu profile of the local Mungiki gang in Bondeni, or ‘cell’ as it was termed by its members, and the strict rules of conduct, led to the exclusion of many young people with multiple ethnic (including Kikuyu) backgrounds who did not want to become a member. When the gang attempted to increase the distilling tax in November 2006, One Touch and Kiharu members teamed up with those belonging to the Taliban gangs from 4B, and violently ousted the Mungiki gang from Bondeni Village (BBC 2006; see also Introduction).
The One Touch gang members re-claimed the Manoki toilet in the aftermath of this clash, but their management was radically disrupted by the violence that followed the 2007 general elections (Waki Report 2008). In the ensuing chaos, Muungano (the organisation of predominantly women that managed the toilet at the time of the described clash) took charge of the toilet in early 2008 with the help of the chief, who aided the group to obtain permission from the city council to renovate the facility. The One Touch gang members had simply been overpowered by Muungano, which had been helped by its partner NGOs to persuade the local administration to give the organisation control of the toilet. The One Touch gang members, as well as their Kiharu and Taliban counterparts, had fought to expel the Mungiki gangs, and subsequently felt a certain amount of entitlement to manage the Manoki toilet as remuneration. Being side-lined in their own mtaa ('ghetto neighbourhood' in Sheng), first by the Mungiki gangs and later by the Muungano organisation, intensified their shared experiences of marginalisation and so feelings of frustration, which partly led these young gang members to violently claim what they regarded as theirs.

However, there was more to it than this. During the time that Muungano renovated the Manoki facility, Bishop Margaret Wanjiru, the Member of Parliament for Starehe (the constituency in which Mathare was located until March 2013), kicked off the construction of several large public toilets in Bondeni and a few adjacent ghetto villages. Wanjiru appointed several groups of mostly young men with a Luo background from 4B with Taliban connections to guard the construction sites. These groups had helped her win the elections during the 2007 campaign. In order to access cheap building materials for the construction of the toilets, she also worked with groups of young men, mostly with a Kikuyu background, from Shantit that had a history with Mungiki gangs. These groups had also assisted her during her election campaign. Bishop Wanjiru identified herself as Kikuyu, but competed for the ODM (Nation Team 2010), which was a political party widely imagined as Luo-dominated ghetto village of 4B. However, she also had a massive following of young men with a Kikuyu background in Bondeni, Kosovo and Shantit, many of whom had been affiliated with the Mungiki. They regarded Bishop Wanjiru as a positive change from the incumbent MP John Kamande, who also had a Kikuyu background and was affiliated to the ruling party (PNU see Chapter 1), which many imagined to be Kikuyu. I will continue this analysis in the next chapter, but this information already suggests that ethnic identifications were ambiguous at best, and cannot therefore explain power dynamics and affiliations on their own. At issue here is the fact that several groups of young men from different ghetto villages and with different ethnic backgrounds had helped Bishop Wanjiru to become the MP for the Starehe constituency, and these groups were promised something in return. As a consequence, many believed that participation in the toilet projects was their rightful reward. Observing other gangs taking control of the public toilets, which were constructed by Bishop Wanjiru after she took office, reinforced the sense of entitlement among the One Touch and Kiharu gang members with regard to the Manoki facility, pushing them even further towards reclaiming the right to manage it.
'We are the community'

The struggle over the Manoki toilet was partly prompted by a desire to secure a steadier income that would help the group members to improve their ability to perform their role as provider, and eventually leave the gang. These men carried multiple burdens on a salary of less than 2 Euros a day (on average), whereas the minimum daily expenses for a family of four easily exceeded 4 Euros (excluding rent, clothes, school fees and so on). When these men exclaimed 'we are the community', they were addressing the women directly and accusing them of taking opportunities away from them, whereas they were expected to be the providers and leaders in the community. Gender relations in Mathare were fraught with such contradictions and high expectations, in both directions. A closer look at the exceptionally disheartening circumstances of one of the gang members helps to highlight how utterly hopeless some men felt.

One day in April 2011, I met Odhis, a One Touch gang member, when I climbed up the cliffs near Manoki on my way to the main road. He was part of a funeral-savings group in the Kiharu gang, which helped its members to pay for the funerals of family members. He looked daunted as he shared with me how he found himself trapped by responsibilities that he could not fulfil.

I need your help, Naomi, they killed my brother. Eeeeeeh! Mob justice...they say he stole at Kiamaiko (a place in Huruma near Mathare where they sell goats), did you see the news? That is how we know, we saw it and somebody told me it was my brother... and we found him in the mortuary, maybe it could have taken days or weeks, sometimes you can’t even find somebody. You know this happens... He was a thief. Why is this happening to me? And I need to bring him home but I don’t have the money. All my money, I spent on my [other] brother’s funeral (who was shot dead by police a few months before), and there is no one to help me, it is me, I have to get this money. He is in mortuary, maybe he has to stay there for weeks, months, I don’t have the money, but then the bill gets higher and higher...I don’t know what to do. I can't sleep, I can't work, I have to arrange everything. At home (his family in the rural area) they tell me to hurry up. I have to bring him home otherwise I can’t build a house and be buried at home. My wife needs money for our rent, and school fees, my children go back to school next week. I don’t know what to do, sometimes I drink to forget, it is stress, I drink because of stress, I don’t know what to do.

On good days, Odhis earned between 100 and 200 Kenyan Shillings (roughly between 1 and 2 Euros) a day doing odd jobs, whereas taking his brother home to Kisumu would cost around 30,000 (approx. 300 Euros). These calculations are exclusive of the funds needed for a proper burial, for which Odhis also felt primarily responsible. He explained that he feared he would be ostracised by his mother and grandmother in the rural area near Kisumu if he could not live up to these responsibilities. The implications of this were
unbearable, because it ultimately meant that, in addition to his brother becoming a restless soul as he was not buried in ancestral lands, he feared he would become one too. Moreover, his social status would deteriorate because he would then have failed to deliver to his family the one thing many families in Mathare strive for, namely a rural home to retire to and, eventually, be buried. Odhis confided in me that he could even "go and rob a house, I have to get the money, how? Everyone is looking at me." By everyone, Odhis not only meant his family members in the rural area, but also his neighbours and friends in Mathare. The funeral savings group and another savings group chaired by his wife had helped him when his first brother had died of alcohol poisoning shortly before his second brother was killed by mob-justice. The brief period of time between the two deaths meant that he had not been able to save or build up enough credit again within the group to ask for assistance and get another loan.

Odhis’s mother lived in the rural area and, after his father died in the early 2000s, she toiled the land his father had inherited in order to take care of the younger siblings. She lived in a mud house near his paternal grandmother’s plot, and the family did not have enough money to cover even basic needs. Odhis and his older brothers had travelled to work in Mathare during the latter part of the 1990s when Odhis had still been a young boy. He had not finished primary school, and assisted his older brothers in various business ventures, including distilling and selling chang’aa, in order to help the family members in the rural area and pay school fees for the younger siblings. He had instantly become the oldest son in the family when his second brother died, and as well as considering himself to be the main provider for his wife and children, he also felt primarily responsible for his mother and younger siblings in the rural area. Odhis’s case was not unique. Many young gang members were bogged down by multiple burdens, and often tried to care for many family members who resided in the ghetto and, also sometimes, in the rural area. As noted, these men were expected to be and perceived themselves as the main providers for their next of kin, especially since fathers and other male relatives were mostly absent. Yet, they often lacked the means to do so. As I have shown, being unable to achieve this popular standard of manhood had a major impact on their gendered senses of the self, and many went to great lengths to still pursue this ideal. Paramount in this endeavour was seeking the appraisal of what most young men termed 'their community.' By this, these men often denoted family members, friends and neighbours residing inside the ghetto. Like Malik in the previous chapter, Odhis expressed an utter fear of being regarded as a failed provider and, as such, a failed man by his friends, family and neighbours. In this vein, the statement 'we are the community' can also be taken as an attempt to counter the judgement of fellow residents that was feared so much. Indeed, it expressed a deep sense of longing, and repeating the slogan over and over during the standoff was perhaps an attempt to convince, even by using force, other community residents that they too belonged to the community.

The deep longing to be included and feel accepted by the community as a man constituted a powerful driving force behind many young men’s social navigation. Buda, a former One Touch gang member, spoke to me one day about a major incident that had
happened to him a few years back. His girlfriend had just given birth, and they had settled together in his one-room house made out of iron sheets. After a few weeks, the girl ran away with the baby to live with another man, and it became clear that the child was not in fact Buda’s, even though he had paid for the hospital and all other necessary items (considered locally to be practices of claiming fatherhood). Buda was very vexed about his girlfriend, but explained to me that his frustration was not so much related to discovering that the baby was not his or that she had cheated on him, but his gradual awareness that his girlfriend was a sex worker. As a consequence, he was mostly afraid of how the community would react to this news. Indeed, he was petrified of becoming the subject of village gossip, because that would have a major impact on his status as a man.

They are talking about me. Everyone, they know about my lady. Even my mother, she is hiding alcohol. My friends say jazaa numba (‘add or fill the number’ in Sheng, meaning to join a gang for a robbery) when I am drunk, you know, to join the gang so the number is strong, and go to rob houses. I can even do that when I am drunk, I really have to stop drinking. At night, I don’t sleep because of my lady so I drink to forget. When I drink I get boostah! (‘to get energy or courage’ in Buda’s way of talking)...I feel like kude?...kudedi! try or die, it is conc (‘strong’ in Sheng) and I forget.

‘Kude?...kudedi!’ is a Sheng phrase that literally means ‘to die’, and loosely translated means ‘try or die’ in the context in which it is mostly used. It reflects the reality of ghetto life: when you do nothing, you have nothing and you will die! Many of the young men I met and worked with at times lacked hope of a better life, and the term ‘Kude?...kudedi!’ expressed a fear of both physical and ‘social’ death (Patterson 1982; Vigh 2006: 240; Salo 2006).

All of this begs the question as to why young men who sought recognition by members of their community attacked and confronted women who were their family members, friends and neighbours. At once, these men desired to belong to the community, yet seemingly aimed to exclude certain others from it.

Gendered notions of class
Kingi mentioned it the most, but many of the young men in Mathare referred to the community as a “ghetto of women.” The gender dimension of the conflict over the Manoki toilet not only derived from the men’s desire to live up to dominant masculinities and procure a steady income; their sense of entitlement and ensuing frustrations over being side-lined were exacerbated by the fact that the toilet was run by the predominantly female members of the Muungano organisation. Mama J alluded to this above when she told how the protestors questioned the legitimacy of the women managing the toilet, and even played a trick (blocking the sewer) to illustrate their incompetence. Interestingly, some of the men seeking to control the facility were related to the female Muungano members opposing them at the standoff. Yet again, other young, male protestors like Motion had been founders and long-term Muungano members, and had even helped with renovating
the toilet. All of this further complicated the conflict. What propelled these young men to not only fight the very organisation they belonged to, but also their own female relatives and neighbours? To answer this multi-layered question, we need to look at why many of these young men constructed Bondeni Village as a ghetto of women and, simultaneously, took themselves to be the ‘true’ representatives of the community.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Mathare can be described as a localised matrifocal society functioning within the context of the wider framework of patriarchy that is still pervasive in Kenya (see also Spronk 2012: 61-62). Right from the onset, women survived here by distilling alcohol and selling sex to soldiers from the barracks nearby (White 1990; Nelson 1987). Over the years, these women have been able to accrue small, mostly informal, properties (such as tin-roofed shacks) inside the ghetto, and this has enabled them to expand their micro-businesses or open new ones. Indeed, apart from bars, women owned the majority of grocery and food stalls, as the selling of groceries was locally considered to be a feminine practice. Nevertheless, selling groceries was a potentially resilient business, as people always had to eat, even in an economic downturn. This all strengthened the position of the women in Mathare in comparison to the men, who instead engaged in businesses that were considered to be more masculine, such as selling clothes, firewood or luxury food items (e.g. boiled eggs, peanuts and chickens – though not chicken heads). Owning a bar and selling *chang’aa* were locally regarded as more or less gender neutral income-generating activities, despite the still slight predominance of female-owned bars.¹

Bondeni did have older, and even a few very old, male residents, some of whom owned bars while others had acquired positions as village elders. Most of the village elders were in fact men, and this group supervised government-led community projects (such as the renovation of the sewers or roads), and worked for the provincial administration headed by the chief. Other older men worked outside the ghetto as day labourers at construction sites, and a few even had long-term employment as janitors or security guards. Young and old women, however, constituted the majority of bar owners, shopkeepers and other business owners inside the ghetto, and they therefore had more opportunity to become involved in NGO-led community development projects than older men who often worked outside the ghetto. Although a few women acquired the position of village elder, and were therefore involved in government-led community development projects, many chose different routes and engaged more in NGO- and CBO-led community development schemes. In this way, they were able to circumvent the still highly patriarchal

¹ Competition made it increasingly difficult for anyone to start a bar in more recent times, and this perpetuated the dominance of the older generation of women and their female and male relatives in this sector. What is more, both men and women shared with me that it was easier for the latter to supplement their income by washing clothes in nearby estates than it was for the former to get a day job at construction sites. Above all, the absence of adult men in a majority of households (owing to, for instance, divorce and untimely deaths) also contributed to the stronger social and economic position of women in Mathare. Most women learned to be self-reliant and develop their own small businesses from an early age. In more recent years, the already stronger social and economic position of women in Mathare was also strengthened by a growing NGO presence there, and many micro-credit organisations primarily focused on helping women and girls. This led to a proliferation of women-led and/or otherwise dominated CBOs such as Muungano in recent years.

157
structure of the provincial administration and claim power in their own ways.

Walking through Mathare with the young gang members revealed to me the extent to which they constructed both the streets in the ghetto and their homes as female spaces. Many of the young men I visited at home acted in an awkward manner, as if they were out of place, while their wives and children determined the routine of such gatherings and domestic life in general. As noted, most shops, non-governmental community development organisations (such as Muungano) and bars were owned, managed or dominated by women. A glance at Mathare’s high street highlighted the position of young men in the ghetto. As women were busy selling vegetables, minding children and doing domestic chores, the young men fetched water and firewood, brewed alcohol or bought food and other necessities from these women. What is more, most of the young men I worked with had accessed their job of distilling alcohol, and had thus acquired their membership of an alcohol distilling gang, through their grandmothers and mothers. Mothers and grandmothers still often gave young, male relatives and potential gang members their first distilling assignment, and referred them on to other, mostly female, bosses. The only male spaces seemed to be gangs, local bars (even though run by women, the bars were mostly visited by men) and distilling sites. Yet, women even intruded in these spaces; at the distilling sites, they often sat high up on a cliff supervising the distilling of their alcohol while the young men near the river worked for them or hid behind a few corrugated iron sheet houses when carrying on with gambling, drinking and smoking.

In the discussion above, Mama J revealed that the young alcohol brewers claimed to be entitled to the Manoki toilet, not only by positioning themselves as providers, but also by stating that they represented the community. This statement has multiple layers, and has to be read in relation to who was addressed by these young men, namely the women from Muungano. They questioned the legitimacy of these women to manage a community project based on their lack of alleged ghettoness, and as such of belonging to the community. Their sense of entitlement thus also emanated from a putative ghettoness which, according to these young men, was embodied by them and not the wealthier women from Muungano. An alleged class divide, based on estimated income, intersected with gender positions, as women in Mathare had more control over and access to economic opportunities than young men. These intersecting distinctions were also evident in the local housing set-up, as many of the female Muungano members and bar owners lived up in the valley near the main road and inhabited one-room accommodation built from solid corrugated iron sheets. Some even lived in stone tenement buildings near the main road. In contrast, most of the alcohol brewers who worked for these women lived down in the valley, close to the river, in shacks assembled from second-hand iron sheets with mud floors. To complicate matters further, some of the gang bosses were also the landlords of the young gang members.

By declaring that the women from Muungano were ‘not the community’, the young men did not deny their residency, or even origin, in Mathare; instead, they were referring to the disparity in income and ensuing living conditions which, compared to theirs, appeared to be of a different class, which was a class they did not deem to be ‘ghetto.’ This
class position was often proudly termed 'ghetto punk' by Mama J and other women from Muungano. Residents from Upper Bondeni often cast those in Lower Bondeni as 'immoral' and 'criminal', whereas those in Lower Bondeni often took residents from Upper Bondeni to be 'exploiters' and 'corrupt.' Strikingly, these binary labels resonated with the dominant discourse on ghetto residents, as well as with the subdominant discourse on elites imagined by most of these residents. Moreover, many young brewers were of the opinion that their bosses only continued to reside inside the ghetto to save money, not out of necessity. As a consequence, they were perceived to be taking away opportunities from residents who had real needs. In this viewpoint, the Muungano women benefitted from projects that should be serving the poor and not the ghetto punks who dominated this and other similar groups. By stating that the toilet is “not for the Muungano women” because “Muungano women do not represent the community”, the young men thus verbalised their frustration that they were unable to meet the stringent membership requirements. The way Mama J explained this suggests that the gang members blamed female and wealthier Muungano leaders for implementing criteria that only the wealthier (mostly female) members could adhere to, meaning that the CBO was not inclusive for a majority of (young and male) ghetto residents. Yet, both women and young, male gang members had founded Muungano in Bondeni Village together. How, then, did women come to dominate this organisation in later years and set such high standards for membership?

**The start of a Muungano Wanaviji in Bondeni Village, Mathare**

During the mid-1990s, there were many forceful evictions and violent demolitions in Nairobi’s ghettos. In response, Muungano, the Kenyan Federation of the Urban Poor, was established at the end of the decade to address land and housing rights among ghetto residents (Bradlow 2011). Muungano was assisted by NGOs such as the Mazingira Institute and Kituo cha Sheria (Alam et al. 2005). From the 2000s onwards, the Pamoja Trust, and later also the Muungano Support Trust (MuST), became the main NGOs supporting the development of local Muungano groups like the one in Bondeni. All of these local groups together constituted the National Muungano Federation, which was a member organisation of the International Federation of the Urban Poor, called the SDI (Slum/Shack Dwellers International). Muungano focused on the implementation of programmes geared towards land and housing rights, and the improvement of public facilities and utilities such as toilets, water pipes and electricity connections.

In 2007, Mama J, Motion and a few other Bondeni residents were invited by a man called Mukuria to visit a Muungano meeting in Kibera. Mukuria worked for the Pamoja Trust (and later for MuST – MuST 2012), and had been assigned to explore the possibility of developing Muungano branches in different ghetto villages in Mathare. By then, the Mungiki had already left Bondeni, but were still active in Kosovo. As a consequence, Mukuria chose to start by approaching people in Bondeni in order to circumvent the potential hurdles that the presence of Mungiki gangs might pose in Kosovo. Soon after their visit to Kibera, Motion, Mama J and her mother called the first Muungano meeting at Kinatiko hall in Bondeni, and started a savings and credit scheme (see also Kimuyu 1999).
Right from the outset, Muungano’s main objective in Mathare was the structural improvement of local infrastructure and public services. Yet, an often-used strategy to bring a group together in Mathare (and in other Nairobi ghettos) is to follow the example of women-led savings groups that have existed there since the 1960s (e.g. Kimani 2009). Muungano’s savings scheme was considered by Bondeni residents to have great potential because of its connection to established NGOs and the SDI. Mukuria mobilised no fewer than 70 members in Bondeni, and within a short time-span the savings scheme was supplemented with other ventures, such as a land project on the outskirts of Nairobi and a micro-credit scheme to help members set up businesses. In recent years, Mukuria and others have also facilitated the establishment of Muungano branches in other ghetto villages in Mathare, such as Kosovo and 4B. As well as group projects, members from the various Muungano groups in Mathare were offered paid work as enumerators for an urban planning and upgrading project that was spearheaded by MuST, SDI and Nairobi University. This endeavour resulted in a 'Mathare Zonal Plan', which was published in July 2012, and was presented as the initial draft of the first ever 'community-led development plan for Mathare' (MuST 2012). All of the parties involved had high hopes that, with the right kind of leverage (such as international support from UN-HABITAT), they could get the government on board for future implementation. At the same time, the Pamoja Trust and MuST had helped several Muungano branches in Mathare with the development of collective income-generating activities, such as water points and the renovation of the Manoki public toilet in Bondeni, and water-pipe connections and a baby-care project in Kosovo.

Yet, from its inception the Muungano in Bondeni encountered insurmountable problems. Women soon began to dominate its membership. Moreover, even though the chair has always been an older man, women mostly determined the agenda of meetings and took up all of the other leadership positions. This power dynamic emerged firstly because the women were able to attend meetings more than most men, as they were often their own boss and could ask someone else to look after their business or just close shop during meeting hours. Accordingly, they were high in numbers during meetings and they shared similar problems. As a consequence, they increasingly determined the agenda of the weekly meetings and amended some of the founding rules and regulations to fit their own circumstances. The dominance of women was a common feature in most community-based organisations, and so on its own did not necessarily constitute a problem. Female members, however, also contributed more to the savings scheme, and within a few months a gendered division emerged between high and low-paying members. This division coincided with the putative class divisions discussed above. The high-paying and mostly female members took up several additional schemes that helped them to access loans at a bank. As a result, most of the female and a few older male members expanded their businesses and eventually earned enough money to become stakeholders in a land-project through which they could eventually acquire property. The low-paying and mostly young, male members thus remained members on paper, but were gradually excluded from the group’s progress. Motion, one of the founders, was among the low-paying members. The
exclusion of young gang members spurred a deep-seated resentment among many of them, Muungano members and non-members alike. The young men fighting over the Manoki toilet thus also acted out of frustration at being side-lined from the opportunities on offer from the community development projects instigated by Muungano and other such groups that were increasingly dominated by women.

**A double bind: depending on and feeling responsible for women**
The Manoki public toilet was the epitome of young men’s fear of superfluity, and forcefully demanding control of the facility was a way of repositioning themselves with regard to women and claiming power as men. These fears first and foremost stemmed from tensions within the intimacy of marriage, as described in the previous chapter. Alcohol distillers in Bondeni, however, depended even more on women to access work and opportunities than was the case for drug dealers. A slight majority of the drug bosses were female, but they did not live in the ghetto and middlemen (all young men who had graduated from drug dealing) organised all of the work. In Bondeni, there were no middlemen and many of the predominantly female bosses lived inside the area. These women were either family members or neighbours of the alcohol distillers, and young men felt both responsible for them and depended on them for work. Accordingly, the alcohol distillers found themselves in even more of a double bind than the drug dealers, and this is a crucial dimension when it comes to understanding the Manoki conflict.

In their narratives, some young distillers repeatedly articulated their fears and frustrations to me, and shared how not being able to live up to social demands has led to them sometimes even beating their wives. Cosmos, a One Touch gang member, explained:

> When I come home with nothing I feel I am nothing. I tried but I did not get anything, she [his wife] is asking me money. I go out every day, early bird, to catch the worm. If she asks and I have nothing. She makes me feel I am nothing. That moment I want to drink and be with my friends, so that is what I do. I can beat her when she asks. Those nights home is only for sleeping.

In his eyes, his wife accentuated his failure by demanding money he had not been able to earn. He told me he already often felt utterly inadequate as a provider and did not need her to rub it in (*kuweka chumvi* he said, 'to put salt' in Kiswahili). During a spontaneous group discussion at a local *chang’aa* bar, Cosmos and a few other gang members shared with me that they felt systematically obstructed from pursuing dignity and developing meaningful lives as a result of their marginalisation, stigmatisation and persecution in society at large. They confessed that the women in their lives embodied a threat to them, and that they felt deeply insecure in relation to their wives because they made them feel utterly inept as husbands. Though Malik expressed similar sentiments in private, the drug dealers rarely spoke about their fears in a group setting. This may allude to the deep sense of urgency the alcohol distillers had about their position as men. Samii, 26-years-old and a One Touch
gang member, said: "We are scared to find out they can hustle better than us." Samii, Cosmos and the other gang members told me that their wives worked as, for instance laundry women, housekeepers or micro-business owners, but often did not share what they earned, whereas the men were expected to share everything they had (see also Chapter 4).

Josh, a 28-year-old One Touch gang member, one day discovered that his wife had a secret bank account with substantial savings in it. He was devastated. He did not dare to confront her, as he was afraid she would leave him. He thus kept quiet and suffered in silence, and continued to share what he had in order to provide for their four children. After hearing about and observing growing numbers of similar incidents between husband and wife in Mathare, I discussed with Mama J why many women kept money from their husbands but, ostensibly, expected these men to provide for everything. She told me:

I always worked, but not all women are like that. They expect their husbands to pay for everything, you see my sister, ha ha ha she is like that. Remember she said: 'your husband is only your husband when he is with you. When he is out, he can be somebody else’s husband.' Many women fear that. [...] Ha ha but she also said: 'your husband has to take care of you, from your hair to your toenails'. Ha ha ha. When I work, I also want to have my own money, for when Kingi is not around, I can buy things myself. I also don't know if he keeps things aside. You never know. I think that is the problem. But for us, our marriage is good. We share, and I also work. Many times the trust is not there, then the wife can hide money so she does not only depend on her husband. Some husbands are not good, they cheat [with other women], and you never know what will happen to you, so you also cheat by saving your own money. But I don't understand about Josh, he is like Kingi, a very good husband. I don't understand his wife.

Not knowing how much their wives earned while also feeling incapable of providing for their family led to a constant fear in these men that their wives would leave them. This would turn them into bachelors again and seriously impede their social navigation trajectories. As bachelors, they would not only lose their status as family men, but also their connections to savings and loans groups and other community-based initiatives run by women in Mathare. To illustrate this, Kingi and Brayo have been members of Muungano projects through their wives, who had put their names on the members list to double their savings and access to loans. Indeed, when his roadside restaurant burnt to the ground due to a massive fire in Mathare, Kingi was able to build it back up again within a week with help from his wife’s loans.

As Cosmos revealed, young alcohol distillers often avoided the domestic setting when they did not make enough money to provide for their families. Samii, for instance, explained that he did not want to eat food his wife had paid for. This, however, added to feelings of marginalisation, and of not belonging, as these men felt ever more excluded, not
only from community based groups like Muungano, but also from their homes. These men often referred to a grammatical gender difference in Kiswahili when describing getting married: men marry (anaoa in Kiswahili) women, yet women are being married (anaolewa in Kiswahili) by men. To many (men and women alike), this highlighted the role of men as the provider, and that women are supposed to be taken care of by men. Many conversations with men, especially, proclaimed the absurdity of 'women marrying men', which, according to them, would start happening if women made more money than men. How did the idea of the growing autonomy of women become such a source of anxiety for young men, many of whom had been raised by single, strong and independent women?

The deep desire to belong to the community, as articulated in the statement we are the community, stemmed from an even deeper longing to have a strong social position as men within the family set-up. Most young men in Mathare were heavily engaged in a social navigation struggles with a view to being recognised as men within their families, where their very position was highly contested. The discrepancy between normative gender relations in Kenya and the reality of absent, adult men (through death, work or divorce) had to be constantly negotiated by both genders. Shaped by the patriarchal social make-up of Kenyan society, both women and men struggled anxiously with the diverging social and economic contexts that marked Mathare. Many men and women I talked with over the years generally affirmed the dominance of men over women (including the obligation of being the provider that went with that position), and considered the growing autonomy of women to be an anomaly. At the same time, they also shifted positions and enacted alternatives to these rather fixed gender roles. Malik often proclaimed that he was the head of the house, and as such he gave voice to his deep-seated insecurity about his position as a man. At other times, he told me that he would not mind sharing the financial burdens with his wife, and he embraced the idea of sharing household tasks. However, it was hard for young men to share positions of control, and to develop and enact alternative notions of man- and womanhood, without a steady income and thus, in their eyes, from an inferior position. Without a steady income, these men feared that the power balance was tipping in favour of women and was making them more effeminate in the eyes of the community. This explains, to some extent, why young men were so engaged in adhering to the role of the provider, albeit against all odds, whereas failing to live up to this role pushed these men deeper and deeper into the gang space, which was the one space they were trying to escape from.

The incongruity between what was widely deemed to be proper gender roles and the reality on the ground in Mathare, thus sparked great anxiety about obligations and expectations between the two genders. As noted above, the tensions between husband and wife also impinged on relationships between gangs and gang bosses. Kingi once told me:

It is weird. You go to your boss. You know we have to ask for our money, sometimes three days after brewing, so we go chase our money. Ha ha. When you see her, you ask for your money, and she can give it to you, when she has it. So, you want to leave because your boss has paid you. Sometimes, she asks
you to stay and buy her a drink ha ha, because you are a man and she is a woman.

Kingi concluded that a man could not refuse such a request by a woman, even if she was your boss who had just paid you. Many men told me, often jokingly, about similar incidents with their female bosses, and shared how they frequently felt caught between being the employee and living up to notions of manhood that are prevalent in the ghetto. Yet, the other reason why these men often felt they could not refuse this request was tied to the fact that the female bosses could easily choose other men to work for them, meaning that pleasing these women was part of their professional relationships. This all illustrates the contradictions and complexities involved in gender relations in Mathare, which culminated in the Manoki confrontation.

An ongoing conflict
Muungano continued to manage the Manoki toilet after the standoff in 2011, and continued to be dominated by women who employed the alcohol brewers at the riverside. The Muungano members constantly feared a repeat of the incident, and their premonitions turned out to be accurate. Again, tensions surged in the run-up to the 2013 general elections held on March 4. As always, there was a period of intense competition over resources during election time in Mathare, and different social groups fell over each other asking politicians for support and access to specific resources in return for influence, votes and security. Village elders, women’s groups, gangs and CBOs such as Muungano all renegotiated their positions of power during the intense months leading up to the elections. Indeed, in the few weeks before the elections, fully-fledged campaigns engaged most residents. Every day, women, elders and youths went to meetings, rallies and secret gatherings, and were paid a lot for their attendance. There had been a few extremely violent clashes between 4B and Bondeni in the months preceding the 2013 elections (Ombati 2012), but the intensified campaigns just before them kept people busy as politicians threw money around. The presidential elections were a victory for Uhuru Kenyatta and yet another defeat for Raila Odinga, which was again disputed by Raila Odinga’s coalition party (Odula 2013).

The weeks following the 2013 elections were marked by tensions in Mathare, as people feared a repetition of the violence that had followed the previous elections held on 27 December 2007. Most people thus stayed indoors, closed shop early and laid low while waiting for the ruling by the Supreme Court on the election results (Patinkin 2013). Nevertheless, certain people took advantage of the impasse, and a group of 60 young men and, interestingly, also a few young women (aged between 16 and 25), from the Kiharu and Shantit gangs, used violence to take over the Manoki toilet again. The young women were not part of Muungano in Bondeni, instead mostly being the girlfriends of Shantit gang members or gang members themselves. Most Shantit gang members were involved in stealing inside Mathare and these groups generally also had female members. This time, the Muungano members did not respond immediately. They feared, as Mama J put it, “a
spark that would lead to fire.” Mama J and a few other Muungano members again went to the chief to complain and ask for help, but he refused to intervene. Mama J believed that he did not want to stir up trouble that might lead to outbursts of violence. She also later explained that she and other Muungano members did not know who was supporting the group of youths and why the chief feared to even hear the case. In general, most cases had to be taken to the chief before they could be transferred to the police. The chief, assisted by his own administrative police force, was in charge of settling minor disputes in order to reduce the workload of the police and the judiciary. However, power relations were in flux, and the postponement of the election results created a space for groups to reverse these relationships and take up new positions on their own terms. The group of 60 youths continued to control the toilet for three months, albeit with great difficulty, because they soon found out that sharing 2000 Kenyan Shillings a day among such a large number of members from different gangs was asking for trouble. After three months, Muungano was able to reclaim the toilet once more, because many gang members had left the facility after several internal fall-outs.

The Manoki saga did not end there, unfortunately. In the early hours of 1 January 2014, roughly six months after Muungano had the toilet up and running again, a major clash flared up between young men (mostly from Shantit) and a group of bar owners commonly referred to as ‘Ugandan refugees’ (see also Chapter 2). This unrelated conflict resulted in a fire that burnt 150 houses near the toilet to the ground, and led to the evacuation of the families living in them, who were those who normally used the Manoki facilities on a daily basis. When I visited Mathare in February 2014, the toilet was still only generating half of its previous income as a result of everything that had occurred in the past few years, which were setbacks that most businesses operating inside this ghetto faced. Manoki’s volatile history shows that its future will probably continue to be marked by strife, since resources in Mathare like public toilets will always be at the epicentre of local power struggles and political games.

Us and the community: an uneasy divide
The Manoki incident did not stand on its own. There were other groups of young ghetto men in Mathare who violently attacked fellow ghetto residents, not just to access opportunities, but to also give vent to their frustrations over feeling side-lined. The term ‘community’ was omnipresent in all of my interviews and discussions with gang members, and, interestingly, reflected a rift that young men often experienced between them and others living inside Mathare. The way that all of the research participants evoked this term evinces a deep desire to belong to the community and, simultaneously, a fear of not belonging. Feeling thwarted in their social navigation struggles by community residents who, in their eyes, distrusted and excluded them, has frequently led to violent conflicts between young men and other social groups in Mathare, as illustrated by the Manoki conflict.

A case in point was the way Blue from the Ruff Skwad gang appropriated the term community. When we were talking about the ghetto farm that Blue and fellow gang
members had developed, and which had been on the decline since its inception (see previous chapter), Blue stated the following:

They think the community does not support them. And it’s true [...] they don’t give us opportunity. We struggle to make these businesses, but customers don’t trust us, they buy from others, and competition is high. It is like, we are good security, but we are not serious businessmen. [...] but they need to give some to us, we need our opportunities, we can’t work at groupo forever. We need a future!

As Blue stated in the above excerpt, the Ruff Skwad gang was taken by most residents of Kosovo to be a vigilante group (Anderson 2002) that punished local thieves, chased out city council tax collectors or power company officials (who regularly entered the ghetto under police protection to try and cut off illegal connections), and protected the village during junctures of violence. Yet, as Blue stated, they were not considered to be a group that was capable (or deserving) of developing a viable business venture. He exclaimed that the gang members do “need a future”, and felt that the way many local residents regarded the group was not only unfair, but also obstructive, because the gang needed local customers to open up pathways out of the gang through business. The Ruff Skwad gang and other residents in Kosovo had an ambivalent relationship. Gang members were often asked to help local residents out. This type of assistance varied from helping to offload a truck of firewood or grocery supplies to settling a score for someone by using violence. Their main purpose from the perspective of other residents, as noted, seemed to be their role as security guards on call. However, their earlier involvement with the local Mungiki gang meant that any endeavours were regarded with great suspicion by most residents; these men were not to be trusted, and every venture that would make them more powerful as a group was monitored meticulously by, for instance, the village elders. Knowing very well the tightrope they had to walk with regard to their community, the Ruff Skwad gang members did not ask for a fee for their services, unlike the Mungiki gang members. Accordingly, in Malik’s words, they threw "wagondi ('thieves' in Sheng) outside [Kosovo] for free ...we have to give back to our community."

The Ruff Skwad gang had been engaged with the Mungiki gang in Kosovo from the day the Mungiki members entered the Mathare ghetto in the early 2000s, but their relationship became more pronounced during the final year of Mungiki rule. A Mungiki gang was ousted from Bondeni Village in November 2006 (BBC 2006; see also Introduction). Kosovo at the time had been a Mungiki stronghold, and a few fleeing members from Bondeni bolstered the local Mungiki gang in Kosovo in an attempt to maintain control inside Mathare. Prior to this, the Mungiki gang in this ghetto village had already started to support the Ruff Skwad football team, through which it had been able to establish a working relationship with the Ruff Skwad gang. Most Ruff Skwad gang members identified as Kikuyu, and even though very few of them went through the initiation rites required to become a full-blown Mungiki member, most worked closely with the Mungiki
gang during its final period of control in Mathare (November 2006-June 2007). A few Mungiki members even joined the savings group set up by the Ruff Skwad gang, and for this period the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub became the Mungiki headquarters in Mathare and where it organised its kangaroo court.

Ruff Skwad gang members found it difficult to talk about this period, and only Malik often reflected back on how many fellow gang members had felt forced to interact and work with the Mungiki gang out of fear. Malik explained:

Mungiki brought security, they killed the big thugs, then other thugs they joined them, we had fear. From Ruff Skwad, only David, and only two others, they were Mungich ('Mungiki' in Sheng) but we were not. We could not agree. When they [Mungiki] were defeated by GSU [the military police], the community beat David and other Mungich from Kosovo, but David's mother begged so her son can stay here.

Mungiki leaders who operated in Mathare ghetto villages were locally imagined to come from rural areas. These groups of young men connected with young ghetto men like David by opening up social, cultural and economic opportunities for them, such as giving them work collecting security 'taxes' inside the ghetto or in the matatu industry. The collaboration with local young men enabled Mungiki gangs from rural areas to gain a footing inside the ghettos. According to Malik, most Ruff Skwad gang members had cooperated with the Mungiki out of fear, whereas only a few, like David, had fully joined as members. In retrospect, most residents I talked to took Mungiki gang members to be extremely dangerous outsiders, but the local young men who had joined the Mungiki gang, or had worked with it during its rule, were regarded as 'stupid boys.' Despite the local differentiation between 'real' Mungiki members from outside and local 'boys', the Ruff Skwad gang members were eyed with suspicion long after the Mungiki had left Kosovo. Indeed, their long-term affiliation with and proximity to the Mungiki gang during its rule led to their dubious reputation and cast many of their activities in a threatening light. A barber near the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub said: "You don't know how far they work together. Maybe they were not members, but they were together with them, it was like a protection. You could not touch them. We don't know what they want to do next, after tasting that power."

When the dust settled after the June 2007 police clampdown on Mungiki gang members in Kosovo (Amnesty 2007), many young men (most of them non-Mungiki members) had been shot dead or arrested, while others had fled to Kayole and other Mungiki strongholds in the city. A few Mungiki gang members who had been born in Mathare and had lived in Kosovo since its inception had been allowed to stay after Mungiki control ended, although not without punishment; local residents had gathered and punished these young men by way of 'mob justice', but they refrained from killing them. After receiving a thorough beating by a group of shop owners (who had been coerced into paying exceptionally high 'taxes' for security to the Mungiki gang by these local Mungiki
members), David, and young men like him, had been forced to apologise publicly to the community. Unlike David, Blue and Malik shared with me that they had been relieved to see the Mungiki gang leave Mathare, as they had not agreed with its repressive regime. Blue said: “They said one thing, like you think they are true, so religious, but they also asked hongo (‘bribe’ in Sheng), and controlled business, they controlled everything, and they can just kill you, hah...we feared them.” In their experience, the Mungiki gang had not operated very differently from the police, and at the same time both Malik and Blue had often been mistaken for Mungiki members and had subsequently suffered multiple arrests (and near-death experiences) by the police. In the weeks following the aforementioned crackdown, the GSU continued to patrol the village to stop the Mungiki gangs from returning, and it took a few months before young men like Malik and Blue could walk about the area and work freely again.

**Giving back and taking away**

After a few weeks, the military presence subsided in Kosovo, and the Ruff Skwad drug dealers returned to ‘Nigeria’, which was where they sold heroin (see Chapter 4). The Ruff Skwad Beach Pub also became operational again and the gang positioned itself once more as a local security group. Nevertheless, its past association with the Mungiki continued to colour the image local residents had of the gang. Since then, gang members have been highly engaged in building stronger ties with the community; apart from providing security without exacting a fee, they have also dug out steps from the cliff that connects Kosovo and ‘Nigeria.’ This helped to create a more passable short-cut to Juja Road to allow children and the elderly to also make use of this route. The question arises as to why the Ruff Skwad gang members had a vested interest in improving their relationship with the community. Their work, namely dealing drugs, did not directly depend on this connection, and nor did a good relationship with the majority of local residents help them in terms of gaining status with regard to other gangs and youth groups. A good relationship with other residents would of course encourage the establishment of a customer base inside the village and as such help any business venture the gang wanted to initiate. All of this played a role, but there was also more to it.

Malik explained: "We dig these steps so the community sees we give back to the community." The phrase 'giving back' to the community was often evoked by young ghetto men to underscore why they volunteered for activities like communal clean-ups. Almost all of the young men I worked with regularly volunteered for local clean-ups and other community service activities. Moreover, gangs, football teams and networks of friends often registered as youth groups not only to access resources and start savings schemes, but to also become formally engaged in community service. Community service was a way to tap into resources provided by NGOs, as most of these organisations only worked with visibly active and registered youth groups. Yet, the commitment with which most groups engaged in community service reveals that there was more to it for its participants. Young men like Malik and Blue told me on many occasions that they wanted to be respected as “strong young men” who had a particular role to play with regard to socio-economic
activities and development in the community. They likewise wanted to be taken not only as a protector, but also as a provider and the head of a household who could partake in decision-making processes with regard to community events and projects. Volunteering for community service activities was thus also geared towards claiming space in a 'ghetto of women' as part of their social navigation struggles, and pursuing recognition as senior men.

In another attempt to connect with residents, a few Ruff Skwad gang members tried to set up a garbage collection project to organise regular clean-ups of a shopping street near the ground where they sold drugs. Yet, during the first such event, a crowd of shop owners gathered to stop the young men in their tracks and take away their equipment. A neighbouring grocery shop owner told me that they feared the gang members would begin by offering this service for free, but would soon start asking for a fee. "You think they do this for free? Ha ha. No, they start out as volunteers but they cannot do anything for free. How? They need to bring home something at the end of the day, right?" Getting a fee, she voiced, would undoubtedly boost the gang and strengthen its position in Kosovo, and that would be unacceptable. According to this woman and others, this was precisely how the Mungiki gang had taken control of the entire ghetto. In the end, a group of Ruff Skwad gang members had looted shops, and local policemen had arrested a few of them. Malik had taken part in the looting, but narrowly escaped arrest. He explained that they had felt frustrated, curbed. "Even if we want to ask for a fee later, we need opportunity. They [the shop owners] need to give us opportunities. We are not Mungiki." This all shows that gang members and other community residents often had ambivalent relationships riddled with tensions, especially when these young men had had some kind of affiliation to Mungiki or Taliban gangs.

'We don't let ourselves be used'

The section above shows that tensions between high expectations and the minimal access these men had to economic opportunities outside the gang were acutely felt, and at times led to violent protests initiated by them against other community residents. Their anger was not only openly directed at the predominantly female business owners and managers of community development projects, but also at fellow young ghetto men who rose above the rest. Many young ghetto men told me that they constantly feared 'being used' by women, older men (especially village elders), and NGOs. Above all, they feared being used by their peers, especially if these peers managed community development projects while seemingly excluding other young men from them.

One morning in November 2010, Malik called me and frantically told me to rush to Kosovo. I was in Bondeni and walked quickly through a labyrinth of slippery alleyways to the community hall near the football field at the top of the hill in Kosovo. Inside the hall, a group of about 50 agitated young men had gathered holding hastily constructed placards stating 'don't use our name', 'we don't let ourselves be used' and 'don't use us' in Kiswahili. When I entered the room, the murmur instantly stopped, and Blue and a young man with dreadlocks called Mumo told me what was happening. Mumo and a few others had been
founding members of a local CBO (the name and other information is withheld for privacy reasons), which had a few bright blue containers on the fringe of the football field near Depot. From these containers, the CBO claimed to support children and youths (and sometimes women) with music and arts workshops, sporting activities and vocational training. I had often seen the containers, but thus far had received conflicting stories about the project’s activities and had never actually met anyone from the CBO. Mumo was involved in the incident that led to the protest. He had asked Simon, the director and main founder of the CBO, if he could borrow a camera to cover a community event. Simon had flat out refused, which brought to the surface the already simmering frustrations felt by Mumo and a few other founding members with regard to Simon and 'his' resource centre (the few blue containers). Mumo explained that Simon had started the CBO with him and a few other young men from Kosovo a little over six years ago, after which Simon had obtained a scholarship to pursue a Master's degree at a university in England. According to Mumo, he and the remaining leaders, as they described themselves, continued the project's activities and Simon raised funds while in England. When Simon returned, the other leaders felt increasingly side-lined from the decision-making, and told me that they often expressed their concerns over funds and overall transparency. Simon did not return to live in Kosovo, but instead found housing in Muthaiga, one of the richest neighbourhoods in Nairobi, just across Thika Road near Mathare. Mumo explained bitterly that he and the others involved in the project did not receive any pay, and were only compensated for their time and input on a piecemeal basis. The fact that Simon drove a car, lived in a very wealthy neighbourhood and did not disclose any details about funds while they continued to volunteer at the CBO without pay had triggered their suspicions. Simon’s refusal to let Mumo use the CBO resources to take pictures of a community event was evidently the last straw.

Mumo and the other leaders gathered near the containers with a steel bar cutter to cut open the large padlocks securing the container doors, and news soon spread to other young men in Kosovo. Their friends from Kosovo, most of whom were Ruff Skwad gang members, joined them, and a few suggested setting fire to the containers. Blue soon realised that the situation would quickly spin out of control, and instead proposed meeting at the community hall and summoning the deputy chief to hear their concerns. I arrived just before the deputy chief, and Mumo and Blue asked me to conduct an online search on the CBO on my Smartphone. This provided them with information on how Simon presented the CBO to the world so that they could compare it to the way they experienced the organisation’s operations on the ground. We stumbled upon an interview in which Simon claimed to have helped 20,000 youths in Mathare, which caused some laughter. Indeed, when they presented their case to the deputy chief, the men stated that they could not name a single person in Mathare who had benefitted from the CBO other than by occasionally taking part in a few sporting and arts activities.

The deputy chief heard the case. He seemed to be on the side of Mumo and his colleagues, and referred the matter to the chief because, as he said, he did not have the right to settle such major cases on his own. A few days later, a second meeting was held at
the ‘chief’s camp’ (the chief’s office on the fringe of Mathare near Huruma), and Simon was asked to disclose all of the information he held about past and present funds. I could not attend this meeting, because the chief had approached me a few weeks earlier and demanded a bribe, and Kingi, who knew him well, advised me to stay out of his way. Indeed, according to Kingi and others, the chief could still obstruct my research project, even if I had all the right documents. I was later told by Mumo and Blue that Simon had failed to deliver the financial records, and this had triggered a protest among the 30 or so young men present at the meeting. A few had again wanted to set fire to the containers, to which threat Simon had told them calmly to go ahead, but that they would face legal repercussions if they did. Mumo told me that they thought Simon knew the law better than them, and his remark had struck a raw nerve in terms of the fear that most young ghetto men harboured in relation to the police and the criminal justice system. I never met Simon and could not verify his side of the story, as he only attended the meeting at chief’s camp, and not those held inside Kosovo. According to Mumo and Blue, Simon had bribed the chief, as he only received a warning to be more transparent in future and pay Mumo and the other leaders a salary instead of a stipend. An hour later, I met some of the men who had seemed so powerful during the first meeting. Now, they sat on an old mud-stained placard in front of the beach pub looking utterly defeated. I asked them if they would continue their protest, but they told me that they feared being arrested by the Administrative Police (AP). According to Mumo, Simon never disclosed the financial records or offered to pay more salary, and Mumo and the others gradually found other organisations to work for. I was puzzled, because on many other occasions young men had often faced the AP, and even the GSU, and had not been deterred by tear gas, guns and arrests. Blue explained that this situation differed from, for instance, the demonstration and looting spree that had followed the rejection of the garbage project by the shop owners. Simon was known to have contacts with highly-placed individuals in the government, and the young ghetto men felt intimidated by his education, national and international network, and display of confidence. They had backed off, Blue said, because they had expected certain defeat. Simon’s contacts surpassed their own, and he was close to the area’s MP, Bishop Wanjiru. She was the same contact that most of the young ghetto men from Kosovo would normally approach to help them get out of jail.

**Between certain defeat and small victories**

The section above highlights that young ghetto men had to meticulously weigh potential risks against potential gain when deciding whether to openly resist ‘being used’ or accept defeat. Daily moments of such decision-making included nightly police checkpoints, harassment by their bosses and being ridiculed or openly obstructed by fellow residents. One incident in particular had caused great fear among the Ruff Skwad gang members, and had made them more cautious when it came to engaging in open resistance.

A few months after the protest against the CBO, Blue and a large group of about 30 Ruff Skwad gang members had violently clashed with older businessmen and women who controlled the illegal electricity business in Kosovo. The incident started when a few gang
members had secretly disconnected all of the illegal networks and removed crucial equipment. The group gathered to face the angry business owners, and demanded that the illegal electricity business be controlled by youths instead of old men and women, many of whom lived in big houses outside the ghetto. This time, Blue was the ring leader, and he later shared with me the following:

It is not good, they control these businesses and we don't have a chance. They are not ghetto, they live in ocha ('the rural area' in Sheng), and have big houses. We have nothing. They came from ghetto, yes, but now they are not part of the community, now they have to give us a chance to build a future.

Blue is again showing here how imaginings of ghettoness and the community were often conflated. This is illustrated by the multiple definitions of the word mtaa in local Sheng, which can mean neighbourhood, ghetto, community and neighbourhood area. Similar to the young men fighting over the Manoki toilet, these men regarded wealthier (former and current) ghetto residents as no longer belonging to the community and, therefore, as having lost the right to monopolise resources. The wealthier business owners called in the AP and more than 30 gang members were arrested on the spot and charged with destroying private (albeit illegal) property. One year on, this case was still going on in court, and every now and then the gang members had to attend and pool money to bribe officers in order to avoid a jail sentence. They have so far used up a major chunk of their daily resources to keep jail sentences at bay, and they are still not free of this threat. The constant anticipation and use of resources caused a lot of stress, and these men continued to feel “abused”, in their words, and frustrated with the limited space they had to change situations of oppression. Incidents like these made these men very careful in choosing when to continue a protest or when to back off.

At other times, protests had the potential to turn into small victories, and were an important outlet for pent-up frustrations. In late March 2011, I was sitting with a few Ruff Skwad gang members in the beach pub when Blue entered and told a few of these young men to go with him. He told me to look out the window (a carved open square in the plywood wall) and watch the hill. He laughed mysteriously. The group went out, and minutes later I saw them climbing up the cliffs to 'Nigeria' while picking up rocks from the ground. Malik stood beside me and explained that the AP had become "greedy, and now they come every day to ask for hongo ('bribe' in Sheng)." The agreement between the drug bosses and the AP and other police forces denoted that these police forces would allow the dealers to sell heroin on the field in return for a weekly bribe. Two AP officers had recently breached this agreement, as they had visited the field almost every day over the past few weeks to demand money. As a result, the increased demand for bribes had reduced the daily earnings of the dealers because they had to compensate for the overall losses. Their bosses held them responsible for safeguarding the agreement on the ground. I quickly realised that the young gang members were out to punish the AP officers for their 'greed' by throwing rocks at them. Suddenly, in shock, Malik and I heard shouts and what we
realised were gun shots. Then we saw a few gang members running down the hill, kicking up dust in their trail. Blue and two others entered the dimly-lit pub out of breath and with a twinkle in their eyes, and they talked all at once to describe what had happened. Amidst laughter, they explained that they had thrown stones at the two policemen who had responded by shooting at them. Blue told me that the young men had quickly found refuge in the labyrinth of alleyways behind Nigeria after they had hit one of the police officers on the head with one of the rocks. All of them felt satisfied with the outcome, and were certain that this would teach the two AP officers to keep to their side of the agreement.

Then, out of the blue, panic erupted inside the bar: news had reached the group of men that the two AP officers had arrested one of the gang members. A commotion ensued until an hour later the allegedly arrested man walked in triumphantly showing his handcuffed wrists to the cheering crowd inside the pub. Apparently, he had jumped from the cliff and escaped using the same route as the others, with the police getting hopelessly lost in the alleyways. A sigh of relief echoed through the bar. Yet, I was still worried and asked how they would remove the handcuffs. Blue laughed at my naivety and took his keychain from his pocket before casually using a key to click open the restraints. I later discovered that many gang members carried a master key to open handcuffs, as well as a padlock master key, because they never knew when these would come in handy. The AP policemen did, however, occasionally continue to ask for higher bribes and clash with the drug dealers. Sometimes, the young men won, while on other occasions they were arrested or even killed. Unfortunately, stray bullets also now and again hit other residents by accident (Star Report 2013; Mukinda 2014), which demonstrates that the risks involved in resisting oppressive structures extended to include all of the residents in Mathare, and did not just affect protestors. Such accidental deaths greatly influenced the already tense relationship between gangs and the community, and the gang members thus carefully assessed which situations called for resistance and would potentially lead to small victories. This all demonstrates that despite such high risks, these young men at times found creative and humorous ways to engage in overt resistance. The ghetto set-up (for instance through its labyrinthine alleyways) to some extent provided these men (and other ghetto residents) with a safety-net against external and oppressive forces. They skilfully used the means they had to, at times, resist oppression and claim power, even if fleetingly and in face of highly restrictive contexts.

Playing 'thugs for hire'
Considering the high risks involved in overt resistance, it is not difficult to understand why most young ghetto men were more often engaged in covertly trying to manipulate power structures to their own end as part of their social navigation struggles. Blue's life story (see previous chapter) has already revealed that such strategies can eventually lead to positions of power in the long-run, and thus often proved to be far more effective than overt resistance. One of these strategies was a practice I call 'playing thugs for hire', and which denotes young men who pretended to be hired by a particular politician, whereas in reality they managed to work for four or five candidates at once. These men played with the
dominant label of 'ghetto boys' to hoodwink politicians and lead them to believe that it was the youths who were being duped and were hired by them alone. Having observed several elections in Mathare over the past decade, it was remarkable to see how young men, some of whom did not even have voting cards, navigated the campaign period with pockets full of cash. Kingi explained:

For many, it is like *vibarua* ('day labour' in Kiswahili). No, it is not about this candidate or that candidate. Yes, they have their own candidate, in their heart, but it does not matter for money. You see them give security in Kosovo to one candidate, and handover to Taliban gang members in 4B, for the same, same candidate. They are rivals, but in campaign they can work together. The next day they work for another candidate, ha ha. I did that, all men do that. It is a time to make good money.

Particularly during campaign season, relationships of power were under constant negotiation, and navigating current power plays between different authorities was a skill that all social groups learned quickly in order to survive in the ghetto. How did young ghetto men navigate these perilous but potentially advantageous political relationships to their own end?

One sunny and lazy Thursday afternoon in August 2010, Blue and I were sitting outside the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub when he received a call. He spoke rapidly in Kikuyu, and almost shouted in agreement before he hung up. He looked at me excitedly: “Okay it was the councillor, Franko, so he is asking me to send some youth, because he has some work for them.” He gave me details of an upgrading project the city council was currently undertaking in Eastleigh, which sounded very similar to Kazi kwa Vijana, a government-initiated youth employment scheme (*see also* Majiwa 2011; Kasarani Youth Congress 2009). “Yah, it is like Kazi kwa Vijana, he has some work for some youth there, for a few days.” This was a different set-up to Kazi kwa Vijana, which project generally hired youths for a period of three months. I asked him why the councillor had called him specifically, and not a village elder or a youth group leader. Blue boasted that he knew most young men in Kosovo, and that they listened to him. According to Blue, Councillor Frank was well aware of his pull among Kosovo’s young men. The councillor must have had a specific interest in strengthening his ties to the Ruff Skwad gang, and to Blue in particular, and I began to see Blue in a different light. Indeed, I had known him for four years and had only now found out that he was connected to highly-placed officials, some of whom, like Frank, even had his cell phone number on speed dial. I realised that this gave Blue powers beyond those of the Ruff Skwad gang, as he was able to connect with both gang and non-gang members from Kosovo through these high-ranking politicians and to the myriad of opportunities they usually had to offer. Blue was paid a commission, a “broker's fee” as he dubbed it, for mobilising youths, and in passing mentioned that he sometimes also did a different kind of work for the councillor, without elaborating further. In the run-up to the by-elections for
the Starehe MP, which were held on 20 September 2010 (Nation Team 2010), I learned even more about Blue’s talents in navigating the political process to his own advantage.

A few days before the elections were held, we climbed the cliffs to Nigeria and crossed Juja Road near Al Badr. Blue and Malik walked side by side and talked to each other in the Kikuyu language, not to purposely shut me out, but because this was the tongue they normally used with each other. In this they stood out, as most young men preferred to talk Sheng, although Blue liked to talk either the Kikuyu language or ‘pure’ Kiswahili (Swahili sanifu or mufti). We entered Eastleigh and went into a building near St. Theresa’s Church, where the curried aroma of Enjera, an Ethiopian dish, guided us to a small restaurant on the first floor. Our mouths watered. We shared one big plate between the three of us, and I asked Blue and Malik to talk in Sheng so I could follow their conversation. They laughed and apologised. Blue was sharing a story on how he had signed up with the local team of Bishop Wanjiru, but had also registered as an official for some of the other candidates. “I am for Mama (Bishop Wanjiru), that is my personal vote, but I work for other politicians as well. They don’t compare lists, so they don’t know and it is good money.” In the weeks before the election, Blue organised security for the different candidates when they visited Kosovo. He also assisted when their local representatives organised the distribution of packages of food or held other events that were geared towards bolstering the reputation of a particular candidate. At other times, he was given money to distribute among youths to persuade them to vote for a particular candidate or was asked to organise and pay a group of young men to attend political gatherings outside the ghetto. Today, he was very excited, because one candidate had given him 10,000 Kenyan Shillings (approx. 100 Euros) to disperse among potential young voters, but he had kept the money himself. He shared with us what he would do with this money: “Ha ha, this to boost my business, to have something for a rainy day.” I asked him whether it was dangerous to keep the money, and he waved away my concerns by explaining that close to election day most candidates were throwing money around and stopped keeping proper records. He had done this before, but Malik looked concerned and told us that he would never do it, because politicians had connections with highly-placed police officers. As a consequence, if they suspected you of misusing their money they could have you arrested and jailed instantly. Blue was unmoved by his words, which surprised Malik. He later told me that even though Blue was his best friend, he knew very little about him and at times suspected that he was more connected to powerful people than he normally let on.

Early in 2011, in the years before the general elections in 2013, the Ruff Skwad gang revived its youth group and began to meet every Thursday evening to discuss and plan new income-generating activities. It did not take long before politicians began to approach the group. The elections were postponed three times (from August 2012 to December 2012 to, finally, 3 March 2013) following political debates about the legal period of office for the coalition government of Raila and Kibaki. As a result, the campaigns stretched out over three years, and groups in Mathare took advantage by strengthening their relationships with different politicians. Several politicians established a connection with the Ruff Skwad gang members by giving sums of money (varying from 10,000 to 50,000 Kenyan Shillings –
from approx. 100 to 500 Euros) to its savings scheme. Most of these donations were made behind the scenes, but one of the politicians who openly associated with the Ruff Skwad gang was Kariuki (nicknamed K1), the son of the incumbent Starehe MP, Bishop Wanjiru. Apart from a substantial donation to the savings group, K1 regularly gave gang members tickets to reggae concerts and football matches. His mother was competing for the Nairobi Governor's seat, which was later changed to the senate seat due to her lack of adequate educational credentials (Ng'etich 2013). Accordingly, K1's path was clear to use his mother's support base in Mathare in his campaign to become the MP. At the same time, Mathare became its own constituency (Muiriru 2014), and this markedly upped the stakes for local groups in terms of building relationships with politicians. Ferdinand Waititu, the MP for Embakasi, was another politician who overtly developed a link with the Ruff Skwad gang. He was a controversial political figure who was rumoured to have connections with the Mungiki gangs in Kayole (which was located in Embakasi), and this sat uneasily with many local residents in Kosovo. Waititu (nicknamed Tito or YT2 by the Ruff Skwad gang members) was competing to become the Governor of Nairobi, but for a party other than that of Bishop Wanjiru. He not only gave the Ruff Skwad gang large sums of money for a new poultry project, but also invited gang members and, interestingly, also their mothers to his house for parties or to use his private gym.

It did not stop there. In June 2012, the bridge that connected Kosovo with the rest of Mathare collapsed, killing one pedestrian and wounding three children who had been playing near to the scene. For weeks, people struggled to move back and forth, carrying water, groceries and children on their backs while dangerously balancing on the broken railings or wading through the dirty water. In the popular discourse, the collapsed bridge soon became the epitome of the basic neglect of Mathare by government institutions. The bridge was next to the pub, and the Ruff Skwad gang saw an opportunity to 'give back' to the community, approaching Waititu who then funded the construction of a new bridge in August 2012. Building a new bridge was a symbolic way for MP Waititu to differentiate himself from other politicians such as John Kamande, the former Starehe MP, who had started projects (such as bridges), but had left constructions unfinished after being elected. It also helped Waititu to compare himself with Bishop Wanjiru, who had built several public toilets in her time as MP, and show local residents that he too had their interests at heart and was capable of allocating government funds to upgrading local facilities. Building the bridge thus became a useful metaphor for illustrating his line of politics, in which he positioned himself as a man of the ghettos who represented the 'street' in national politics. Waititu declared that he aimed to connect (bridging) the marginalised ghetto with the booming city where decisions were made and where the 'national cake' was divided. Interestingly, during her failed bid for the senate, Bishop Wanjiru also worked closely with the Ruff Skwad gang. Moreover, she too constructed another bridge in Kosovo, right next to the one built by Waititu, using government funds to mobilise her support base in this part of Mathare.

To my surprise, this time round it was not just Blue, but also Malik, who was at the forefront of arranging short- and long-term partnerships between the Ruff Skwad group
and these and other politicians and authorities. Malik told me that he hoped to help the Ruff Skwad youth group to develop several collective business projects together. With the money from the various candidates, the group had built its own chicken farm next to Blue’s private chicken farm behind the Ruff Skwad Beach Pub. Yet, like all other previous ventures, this business earned nowhere enough for members to leave the gang. After the elections, the attention and concomitant money flows from the political candidates came to an abrupt halt, and the commitment of the members gradually dissipated. A few continued to look after the chickens, but none really believed that the farm would ever help them substantially. This all shows that during certain junctures of heightened uncertainty, such as in the run-up to elections, young ghetto men were able to fleetingly navigate the power relations that were in flux to their own advantage. These periods could last from a few months to even several years, but they always ended. As soon as their services were no longer needed to further the agenda of political candidates or other authority figures, these young men lost the space to manipulate these relationships. A few, like Blue, continued to play a major role, but others depended on key figures like him to access resources during periods of low intensity. This begs the question as to whether groups of young men could build more lasting ties with NGOs. However, in my 16 years of research, I have only come across one group of young ghetto men that has been able to overtly resist a powerful NGO and thrive as a group irrespective of political support.

The monopolising power of an international NGO

The reach for resisting powerful NGOs and the limited chances of achieving this are well illustrated by the case of a group of young ghetto men from Bondeni who were successful in setting up their own vibrant CBO. These young men, and many other community residents, considered this to be the ultimate form of resistance against the alleged exploitation of Mathare residents by this and other large, foreign-led NGOs. I will first provide a background to the NGO at issue, before analysing how and why this particular group of young men became successful in resisting it over the long term.

The Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) was founded by Bob Munro, a Canadian national, in 1987 to engage youths from the Mathare ghetto villages in sporting activities and ghetto clean-ups. From the mid 1990s onwards, hundreds of girls, boys and young men (young women were mostly absent in the different MYSA leagues) in Mathare played in MYSA teams that were organised according to age and gender. Junior teams were comprised of individual members from different ghetto villages. In contrast, the senior ('under-18' and 'over-18') teams within the MYSA leagues were mainly based around existing formal and informal youth groups and gangs. Initially, a third of the junior teams were comprised of girls, but girls rarely made it to more senior teams and the number of these teams has been declining in Mathare following a cut in funds from international sponsors. Conversely, the junior boys teams thrived and led to the formation of circles of friends in specific ghetto villages such as Kosovo and Bondeni that gradually evolved into bazes (of both youth groups and gangs), or vice versa, around which most senior teams were later established.
During the football season, 'under-18' and 'over-18' teams of young men from all over Mathare competed against each other almost every weekend in the different MYSA leagues. Most games were organised at the Police Depot football field near Kosovo. Malik often explained to me that football was an important space for groups of young men (gangs, youth groups) to build their reputations in relation to each other. During the frequently organised league games, tournaments and friendly matches, teams from all of the ghetto villages in Mathare interacted regularly at the football field. During such encounters, players commented loudly on other teams' strips, their physical state (being drunk, hung-over or having pot-bellies) and performance. The atmosphere was almost always friendly, albeit with an edge. Emotions ran high because a lot was at stake, and frustration, anger and rejoicing rapidly replaced each other. Mostly, it was just great fun for players and spectators alike, an important outlet for pent-up stress, and a unique opportunity to demonstrate skills and forge new bonds of brotherhood.

Over the years, MYSA expanded its football leagues to encompass 15 other zones in Nairobi in addition to the long-existing Mathare zone. This allowed the winning teams from the Mathare zone to compete with winning teams from other neighbourhoods. The expansion of the MYSA leagues had both negative and positive effects on local teams in Mathare. It drastically reduced the opportunities for local players to make it to the teams that visited the Netherlands and Norway annually to train and compete with local football teams. Furthermore, MYSA began to concentrate more on developing facilities such as libraries in zones other than Mathare in order to build a rapport with local groups there. What is more, it now had to divide its sponsorships and other rewards for participation and leadership among a growing number of contenders. The fact that MYSA continued using the word Mathare in its name (that is Mathare Youth Sports Association – MYSA), even though its attention seemed to have shifted to other zones, offended many Mathare residents and has led to multiple demonstrations over the years. Nevertheless, a positive impact of all of these changes within the MYSA Leagues was that the players from winning teams played against and interacted with teams from other zones. As might be expected, this added to their status with respect to other Mathare teams.

Nonetheless, the distraught relationship between MYSA and residents in Mathare worsened over the years and culminated in several volatile demonstrations and strikes. Ever since MYSA started its work, but especially after the expansion of zones, Mathare has been rife with rumours about corruption and sex scandals in connection to this NGO. Strikes were often organised in response, and entailed the refusal to participate in MYSA league games and preventing MYSA officials, visitors and donors from gaining access to the ghetto. In general, these strikes could last for more than three months. They usually ended after a while, because people just really missed playing football. In the meantime, the MYSA officials tried to soothe the protestors with promises that were never kept, and so these assurances did little to resolve the standoffs. On the contrary, the meetings between MYSA officials, football players and volunteer coaches during the strikes were more often than not tense and unproductive. The direct reason for Mathare players and volunteer coaches going on strike was often the unreasonably high bribes they had to pay MYSA officials to
access annual trips to Europe and other opportunities. As a consequence, it was unlikely that the officials who posed the problem, according to the protestors, would be part of the solution. The tensions between MYSA and Mathare’s residents also emanated from a deeper problem that had more to do with unmet expectations than with alleged corruption. Most organisations in Mathare were permeated with corruption, and sex scandals were not uncommon. To explain this underlying layer of tension, I now turn to describing the origins of the group of young ghetto men who founded their own CBO as a mode of resistance to the monopolistic powers of MYSA.

**True ghetto: fashioning access through styling the body**

The Destiny club started out as a MYSA football team that was founded by a group of teenage friends from the Manoki area of Bondeni Village in the early 2000s. The young boys went to school, but were also engaged in youth groups, illegal alcohol distilling, petty theft and other hustle practices. Most of them fended for themselves, even if they were all still below the age of 15. The Destiny football team registered as a youth group in March 2006. The bordering on celebrity status that Destiny’s leaders enjoyed in Mathare derived from the success of the football team in the MYSA league, and from the fact that the youth group operated from a brightly painted office in a stone building on the Eastleigh-side (and not the ghetto-side) of Juja Road. This marked these young men out as being of a different class to most youth group leaders who operated from small and dark iron sheet offices inside Mathare. Their status was also based on the different projects they ran inside the ghetto (varying from clean-ups to educational programmes). Yet, it was their mode of dress, sense of fashion and personal conduct that particularly triggered widespread admiration, envy and sometimes contempt among many young men (and women) in Mathare. Many Ruff Skwad gang members, for instance, told me that Destiny’s leaders displayed a level of *swag* that cast a shadow over all other groups, including them, and as such they were ranked the highest of all *majanja* (‘street wise hustlers’ in Sheng). This also shows that gangs and youth groups were not considered to be that different from each other, especially in relation to group rankings (see Chapter 4).

Destiny profited from changing times in NGO involvement in Mathare in unexpected ways. Over the past decade, more and more educational and socio-economic opportunities opened up for youths in Mathare as a result of the work of MYSA and other NGOs (such as Nairobits) that often started operating through MYSA. Destiny was one of the first groups to benefit from this widening network of international organisations and volunteers working inside the ghetto. Destiny’s football players successfully navigated the rapidly-changing social landscape in Mathare, using their styled bodies to connect with the growing number of international volunteers visiting the ghetto. Like many other local MYSA league players, they volunteered as referees for younger teams or as coordinators of clean-ups. MYSA staff members increasingly noticed the Destiny players because of their ability to connect with the international volunteers who regularly came to work at MYSA. As a result, they were almost always appointed to help newly-arrived volunteers from outside Kenya in terms of getting acquainted with the MYSA projects in Mathare and with the ghetto itself.
One of the Destiny ‘tour guides’ was even jokingly called King Mswati (after the infamous King of Swaziland who married a new and additional wife each year), because he could often be seen walking in Mathare with a string of predominantly young, blonde female visitors and volunteers (mostly from Norway) in his trail. In 2005, Destiny widened its network among its international contacts when an American volunteer/photographer invited a few of its players to a party organised by UN interns. From then on, Destiny’s players became frequent visitors to these parties, and developed romantic relationships and friendships with several of these interns.

These young men were considered (by men and women in Mathare and by international volunteers/UN interns) to be very handsome, and they knew it. Indeed, from the moment they became part of the UN-intern network of friends in Nairobi, some of them visibly started to tweak their good looks to increase their appeal to their new friends by growing fashionable dreadlocks and wearing stylish apparel from upscale brands that showed off their muscular bodies. Through their friendships and romantic relationships with UN interns and MYSA volunteers, the Destiny players established a solid support network in various Western countries. This enabled them to found their own youth group in 2006 that they also named Destiny after the football team. Since then, several Destiny youth group leaders have travelled to and worked in Europe and Canada. Many have had long-term relationships with white women, and a few even married their white girlfriends and eventually migrated to Europe and Canada. Walking through the ghetto, the Destiny youth group leaders oozed confidence, and their level of swag had even bestowed on them the title ‘celebs’; they were taken as the true embodiment of ghetto celebrities.

As brought out by Malik in the above section, football was a key space for groups of young ghetto men to interact and perform swag. It was also a political space where young men like the Destiny leaders claimed power in relation to MYSA. Over the years, a few Destiny players had been recruited by MYSA to play for its professional team Mathare United, which played in the Kenya Premier League. Most young football players in Mathare longed to play professionally, as this was perceived to be one of the few pathways out of the ghetto. As a consequence, the recruitment of Destiny players to the professional team further underpinned their celebrity status in the ghetto. Yet, these young men increasingly felt taken advantage of by MYSA; according to them, MYSA took their photos and stories to raise funds for the professional team and for the training and community service activities within the different MYSA zones. However, the majority of the professional players in Mathare United did not come from Mathare, and those that did, such as the Destiny players, were only selected to play in professional games on a piecemeal basis. Fed up with the empty promises made by MYSA, the Destiny players eventually left Mathare United, pulled the Destiny football team out of the MYSA leagues and founded a new professional football team in 2009, which they dubbed True Ghetto.

From its onset, this team clearly positioned itself separately from MYSA by organising its own events and by demonstratively recruiting players only from Mathare. It initially used the name of an old team that most of the selected players used to play for to enable it to enter the Kenya Premier League at the first level (the Nairobi League). It then
changed its name to True Ghetto. The many residents I spoke to supported True Ghetto and perceived it to be a viable and promising alternative to the, in their eyes, corrupt ways that MYSA had used to operate in Mathare for the past ten years, which was a judgement that was later supported by the main donor organisation of MYSA (Strømme Foundation 2012). Malik and a few other Ruff Skwad players were chosen to play for the True Ghetto team. I sometimes accompanied them to Depot Field for the daily practice starting at 5PM and ending at sundown, mostly around 7PM. Malik's father had been a known MYSA coach in the Mathare zone, and had always aspired to personally guide teams to the Netherlands and Norway, but he never had been selected by MYSA staff members. He attributed this to the alleged corrupt nature of the selection processes (of both coaches and players) at MYSA that disproportionately affected Mathare more than other (more affluent) zones. He explained that, unlike contenders from more affluent zones, most candidates from Mathare could not afford the required bribes. As a result, he had never been able to build a career as a football coach despite volunteering at MYSA for more than a decade. He explained to me that his bitterness over lost opportunities at MYSA became his driving force to train True Ghetto for free, and hoped to guide this team to greater heights than the, in his eyes, fake Mathare United team promoted by MYSA. True Ghetto struggled to provide players with strips, lunch and transport, but despite its disadvantages compared to other teams in the same professional league they performed moderately well and got better as time went by.

**Conclusion**

This chapter highlighted why groups of young men engaged in violent confrontations with groups of other ghetto residents. It also explained when and how such confrontations at times enabled these men to claim power in their own ways. There are many different reasons why young men shifted back and forth between enacting the roles of the provider (at home) or diligent worker (in relation to gang bosses) and the violent contestant. Many of these motives were tied to their desire to achieve senior manhood and emanated from a deep fear of becoming redundant in relation to women. This chapter showed that when young men felt that the navigation strategy of performing the provider and employee roles did not seem to lead to them attaining a higher social status as men, they charted other and commonly more violent strategies. In addition, their wives and mothers were more often than not economically more stable than them. Accordingly, even when men were able to achieve senior manhood, this position remained highly contingent and necessitated a continuous struggle on their part to maintain this role. The chapter also revealed again how it was almost impossible for these men to develop collective income-generating activities outside the gang structures.

On the one hand, groups of young men were locally taken as security, day labourers and helping hands, yet on the other the history of the Mungiki groups had made the majority of residents suspicious. It was a catch-22 situation. To most, allowing groups of young men to develop would diminish the powers of gang bosses, local business people and village elders, whereas curbing these groups led to recurrent conflicts. Within these highly restrictive contexts, young men occasionally claimed power in their own ways by
navigating political relationships during election campaigns to their own advantage, yet this chapter also showed that only a few have been successful in the long-term. Furthermore, groups of young men carefully assessed when and how to claim space and resist oppression by the police, peers, bosses, NGOs and community residents. Met with direct acts of violence in everyday encounters, groups of young men too often responded with their own direct acts of violence, but on the whole only managed to sporadically gain small victories in the process. On a rare occasion, a group of young men has been able to move beyond the realm of small victories and establish itself as a CBO while resisting one of the most powerful NGOs in Mathare. Unique about this group was that its members skilfully navigated their social relationships with UN interns to their own benefit by performing *swag*, and without resorting to violence.

As it happened, the Manoki clash did not occur in direct relation to elections. Nevertheless, this incident was tied to changing power dynamics and, as such, to local politics, albeit less obviously so. All of the tensions and conflicts described in this chapter came from feelings of exclusion based on specific intersecting gender, age and class identifications. Remarkably, ethnicity was not at the fore of these conflicts, and this gives important nuances to the dominant use of ethnicity as the sole trope with which to understand violence in this ghetto. The majority of young, male challengers identified as Kikuyu, and fought the women who managed the public toilet, the majority of whom also identified as Kikuyu. Other axes of identification were clearly at play, such as gender, locality, socio-economic status and age. The question thus remains, however, as to how standoffs, clashes and conflicts between gangs and other social groups would be framed if they had taken place during election times. Probably, the dominant media representations would have explained these junctures of violence through a trope that was most familiar to them, notably ethnicity. The question I take up in the next chapter is: from the perspectives of the local residents involved, when, why and how did ethnicity play a role in conflicts between residents and groups in Mathare that arose in relation to political events?

Introduction
If the clash over the Manoki public toilet discussed in the previous chapter had occurred in the run-up to, during or in the immediate aftermath of elections, it would probably have attracted a lot of media attention. Indeed, it would subsequently have been branded as political violence by the media, government authorities and NGOs. Moreover, keen journalists would have scrutinised the incident through a framework most familiar to them, namely ethnicity. The term political violence in Kenya in both popular and academic discourse thus seems to be entirely conflated with ethnic violence (e.g. Mueller 2011; Waikenda 2014). Yet ethnic identifications had very little to do with the clash over the Manoki public toilet, as most of the people on the two sides of the conflict identified as Kikuyu. The previous chapter has already suggested that imaginings of 'us' and 'them' in Mathare shifted constantly and were based on a myriad of possible identifications and mechanisations of exclusion. This shows that taking ethnicity as the main trope with which to understand direct acts of violence in this ghetto, and branding it as political violence, grossly eschews the local dynamics and complexities at play. Looking at how political practices (Pandey 2006) like the ethnic notions of belonging conjured up by the political discourse, majimboism, were negotiated by Mathare’s residents in relation to shifting contexts may help to shed light on how different acts of violence emerged from the social and material effects of routine violence. In this vein, the concept of everyday violence is helpful when it comes to approaching how these effects are experienced by people and shape their involvement in violence.

The media did not pick up on the Manoki conflict. Yet other incidents that took place close to the March 2013 elections were widely understood in ethnic terms and taken as preludes to forthcoming political violence. Ethnicity did play a role in many of these conflicts, but never on its own; it was always intersected with other types of identification, and master hate narratives on ethnic groups were often re-imagined to legitimise violence against each other. Accordingly, a closer look at the historical, political and social factors that converged during a specific moment in time and space, based on the perspectives of the people involved, is necessary. Moreover, most moments of violence in Nairobi’s ghettos have political implications (see previous chapter), but were not directly linked to elections. Viewing violence in Mathare (even if it took place around election time) through a political lens only perpetuates the stereotypes that young, working gang members in particular were driven by ‘primordial ethnic animosities’ and so-called ‘idleness.’ The latter is a term frequently used in the Kenyan media to point to the alleged susceptibility of young ghetto men to being hired as ‘thugs’ by politicians. In this view, they ‘have nothing better to do and are in desperate need of money’ (e.g. Wamucii & Idwasi 2011; Were 2008).
persistent perception reduces complex decision-making processes among working gang members to money and takes them as being devoid of any morals.

In this chapter, I take a close look at junctures of violence that have all been labelled as political violence by local residents and the media. I begin by analysing a case in which Kingi was accused of having participated in the post-election violence of 2007/8 based on an incident that had happened weeks after this particular moment of violence had subsided. This case allows me to detect how notions of us and them based on ethnicity interacted with ideas of natives and visitors, and why and when such intersecting and shifting notions gained strength between neighbours. Kingi lost his business during the post-election violence and, along with other young men from his building in Upper Bondeni, had to sleep outside for weeks on end to protect his family inside the tenement. I discuss why close friends and fellow working gang members (led by Motion) attacked him and other gang members during the post-election violence. This helps to highlight the fluidity and context-boundedness of working gang membership, especially during junctures of violence, and how shifts in membership were tied to addressing immediate needs and were often legitimised by drawing on master hate narratives. This will allow me to uncover when, how and why ethnicity intersected with the notion of natives and other space and time-bound identifications, narratives and positions. In an effort to further contextualise the apparent self-evidence of ethnicity in the dominant depictions of violence in Mathare, I then proceed to analyse conflicts between ethnic-based and working gangs in Mathare in the aftermath of the 2007 and in the run-up to the 2013 general elections. These analyses will enable me to reveal when, why and how ethnicity temporarily moved to the fore- and background in shifting social and political relations. I thus set out to contextualise the role of ethnicity in boundary-making by exploring the experiences, motivations and legitimisations of young working gang members. I also delve into the overarching question of why and how many conflicts emerge in Mathare.

**Charged with political violence**

The following case introduces the ambiguous articulations of local and ethnic notions of belonging that are prevalent in Mathare, as well as the fluid ways in which people there legitimise processes of othering and moments of violence by drawing on ethnic hate narratives.

I was on the number 46 *matatu* late one Tuesday afternoon in August 2009 when my mobile phone vibrated in my back pocket. Mindful of the infamous snatchers operating near Ngara market who could open the bus window and grab your phone in the blink of an eye, I answered with my head down between my knees. Mama J: "You have to come!" she gasped. "They took him to Kamithi (a prison outside Nairobi). They..." She started crying silently. I got off the *matatu* and took another one back to Mathare. When I entered the *hotelli*, Mama J ordered her children out of the small tin-roofed restaurant and started to explain what had happened. Kingi had been arrested because he had been charged with participating in the political violence that had followed the general elections held on 27 December 2007. According to Mama J, the complainant had bribed the police, court officers
and alleged witnesses to exaggerate the accusation of minor assault that Kingi had previously been charged with. The new charge was a serious offence, especially in light of mounting international pressure on the newly-installed coalition government to act on and bring to justice the supposed perpetrators of political violence (Amnesty 2008). Kingi could face years in prison for what seemed to have been a trivial tiff between neighbours in the form of a punch-up that had happened weeks after the political violence in Mathare had subsided, and days after the coalition agreement between the two main presidential contenders had been signed (Juma 2008:160). So, what had happened between Kingi and his neighbour, and why had Kingi suddenly been charged with participating in political violence?

In mid-March 2008, Mama J, who was Kingi’s wife, had got into a row with her next-door neighbour because they both wanted to wash clothes at the single sink in front of their houses, and both had been in a hurry. They lived on the sixth floor of a stone flat in Mathare and shared one toilet and tap with 12 families living in adjacent one-room houses of four-square metres in size. The women exchanged harsh words, and both left the sink fuming with anger. No washing was done that day. Later in the afternoon, the neighbour’s husband came home and banged on the door of Mama J’s house. He grabbed her forcefully and shouted that she was a dog (a very abusive swear word in Kenya), was in the same boat as him and should not feel superior. He then walked along the corridor and shouted to the people living in the other one-room houses to close their doors because thieves could come and rob them. The neighbour’s husband here was drawing on the dominant hate narrative depicting Kikuyu people as thieves and arrogant exploiters. Kingi, who at the time was serving customers at the hotel, had been told by another neighbour what was happening and entered the scene when the man was shouting abuse about Mama J across the staircase for the entire building to hear. I have not been able to establish who struck the first blow, because the neighbours gave me different accounts of the same event, but all agreed that the man eventually pushed Kingi down six flights of stairs and out onto the street. A crowd had gathered, and a few young men jumped in to help Kingi who was on his back trying to fight off the neighbour. When they were pulled apart, the two men were bleeding from cuts made by the keys they had both used during the scuffle. Two young men gave the neighbour a last punch in the stomach and on the head, allegedly to punish him for starting the fight in the first place. Kingi and the neighbour went back upstairs to their adjoining rooms, and the crowd slowly dispersed. Another brawl, another day, or at least that is what most people thought after the fight had ended.

Over the next few days, the man stayed at home, and Mama J and Kingi became increasingly worried until the police came and confirmed their growing fears; instead of filing an assault charge with the chief, which was common in the case of minor disputes, the man had formally accused Kingi of assault. He had also not gone to the nearest police station in Pangani, where the case could have been settled by paying a fine, which was the second option if the chief refused to take on a case or was unavailable. Instead, the neighbour had filed an assault charge at the main police station in Kasarani, which was located much further away from the ghetto, and where he knew a few police officers. This
increased the gravity of the case significantly, as the investigation would be conducted by higher ranked police officers and would almost certainly be redirected to court. It would also cost more to bribe officers at the station to persuade them to drop the case, which was money that Kingi and Mama J did not have. Accordingly, the matter went to court, and Kingi had been summoned for a pre-trial hearing in May 2008. In return, Mama J and Kingi had tried to file an assault case at the Pangani police station, but they were sent away by the desk clerk because, as Mama J put it, "the case did not need official investigation, to them (the police officers at the Pangani station) it was merely an argument between women." I arrived back in Kenya in August 2008 and discussed the case with Kingi:

"Thank you siz, but I don't need a lawyer, ha ha, you know this man is lying and everyone knows, everyone! He can't make a case against me. You know how they (police and court officers) do it, they just make the case go on so they can eat money, and also him (the neighbour). He is only after some money. I don't have the money, so I just have to go to court, maybe now, then it is postponed again so I have to go back in two months, it really is nothing serious. Don't worry siz, nothing will happen. He is just fala!"

There are several reasons why court cases in Kenya often take a long time. The most obvious is that its court-houses are generally overburdened with work (Analo 2014). This means that there is not enough time for court officers and investigators to properly prepare cases and scrutinise claims, with the result being that hearings are repeatedly adjourned. Furthermore, I myself have observed and heard of several cases where the court dragged them out to increase the number and amount of bribes that were exchanged to influence certain outcomes. Kingi's case involved a little of both.

Between August 2008 and August 2009, Kingi had been summoned to court several times, and the case was always postponed, officially for the lack of a formal investigation, although one was never initiated. When Kingi returned to court on that fateful Tuesday in August 2009, he expected another adjournment on the same grounds, but was instead met by a row of fake witnesses, who were people he had never seen in his life. Apparently, the neighbour had not only bribed the officers at Kasarani police station to take up such a minor dispute at the start of the case, but had now also invested a lot of money in hiring a group of eight people to pretend that they were neighbours and witnesses to the event. These people did not live in Mathare, as Mama J and others later told me. As noted above, the man had stopped working, allegedly because he was too injured to do so, and he expected Kingi to pay him a large sum of money in compensation. This was recorded in the case file I read when I met the investigating court officer at the time that Kingi was in prison. Kingi's neighbour had thus invested a lot of money, time and energy in this case. These investments had significantly boosted the stakes for him, which Kingi was yet to become aware of. The higher stakes had led the neighbour to bribe case officers at the court to change Kingi's charges from minor assault to the far more serious accusation of

186
'participation in post-election violence'. This considerably increased the potential financial settlement that was expected to be part of the verdict.

During this fateful hearing, the hired witnesses gave a completely different account of what had actually happened. I have also read the report that was produced afterwards and talked to the two neighbours who had accompanied Kingi and Mama J to court that day, but were not given permission to speak. The main difference in the accounts pertained to the motivation the hired witnesses ascribed to Kingi for ‘attacking’ his neighbour. Kingi’s neighbour identified as Kissi. Strikingly, during the violence that had followed the 2007 general elections, putative Kikuyu and Kissi groups had not been regarded as enemies in the way that Luo and Kikuyu groups had been pitted against each other in the dominant discourse. This discrepancy had not stopped the bribed witnesses from claiming that Kingi, with a Kikuyu background, had attacked his neighbour with a Kissi background in revenge for the losses suffered during the post-election violence. This purportedly substantiated the new charge, even if the incident had taken place after the post-election violence had subsided. Kingi was arrested on the spot, and it took us some time before we discovered that he had not been taken to Kamithi, but to a prison in the industrial area in Nairobi.

At least he was imprisoned in the city, and over the following weeks Mama J and I waited at the prison gate at seven each morning to ask for permission to see Kingi and help him with money (for water, a mattress and basic food items) and other permissible items (a blanket, slippers and toothbrush) that he needed to survive inside. We never saw Kingi alone or even in the same room; during visiting hours, prisoners were huddled together in a small locked room with only a few dirty triplex windows with tiny holes for sound to pass through. Visitors also had no privacy, as we had to stand in an open hallway full of guards and shout through the window to exchange information. We never knew how much of the money and other items made their way into Kingi’s hands, because the guards who secretly passed them on to him took their own share, allegedly to compensate for the risks involved. Kingi became very sick in prison, and the 14 days until the next court date were almost unbearable for him and Mama J. Apart from our morning visits, Kingi at times managed to phone us at night on a clandestine mobile phone to tell us how he was. In the meantime, a court officer had started an official investigation and often visited Mathare to talk with neighbours and friends of Kingi.

Two weeks later, we all went back to court, and Mama J and I first met with the official investigator to discuss the outcome of his research, which seemed to favour Kingi. Many family, friends and neighbours had gathered in the courtyard to show Kingi support, hopeful of his release. The courtroom was full, and among the spectators sat Kingi’s neighbour, the complainant, all by himself. Kingi was arraigned in court with 19 other men, and the presiding judge rapidly closed 18 cases before lunchtime. Kingi and one other man were still sitting on the bench for the accused when we were all ushered out of the courtroom for the lunch break at noon sharp. The clerk assured us that even though the court had been adjourned, the judge would continue at 14.30. However, when we arrived back on time, we found an empty courtroom. Mama J panicked, and we tracked the investigative officer down who reluctantly explained that Kingi had already been taken
back to prison. Without looking directly at the man, Mama J whispered to him in the Kikuyu language that we had brought money. He then left, and after an agonising hour came back to escort Mama J to the office of the presiding judge. She told me later that she had given him and the court officer the money she had been able to raise among friends and family before the court date. After receiving the money, the judge had curtly told her to wait outside without confirming to her whether or not Kingi would be released.

We stood outside the courthouse watching other families leave with their loved ones when suddenly we heard Kingi say "hi" behind us. He later told me that he had already been put back on the prison bus when a guard suddenly came in to release him from his handcuffs. He looked sick and thin, but was a free man and all charges had been dropped. Even now, Kingi and Mama J speculate about what led to his release and still cannot figure out why the neighbour had shown up in court all by himself. They did not think that the money they had raised exceeded the bribes the neighbour had invested, and nor did they think justice had prevailed and the judge had finally seen through the charade conjured up by the neighbour. They thought it was more likely that the neighbour's brother, who happened to be the caretaker of the building, had forced the complainant to drop the case because the tenants at the flat were siding with Kingi. Their supposition was supported by the fact that the neighbour was forcefully evicted by his own brother the day after Kingi was released from prison. Apparently, other neighbours had complained that they could not reside in the same building as this man, and the caretaker had acknowledged publicly that his brother had been wrong. Kingi reflected:

I can't believe my luck, I came back to paradise, home is paradise. I don’t know how, some people they stay in there [prison], they get lost. It could happen to me, if I did not know people in Mathare, they help me, my neighbours, my family. I saw many of them, also many from Mathare who just are inside. Ha ha, you know they helped me? Some knew me from before, they are seniors in prison, and they helped me to get a mattress. Others left me alone because now they know I was from Mathare. Ha ha, finally a place where it helped me to be from ghetto!

This case has multiple layers that I will analyse below in relation to other violent cases and events in Mathare in order to explore the complexities often involved in the label political violence. These layers pertain to relationships between neighbours and putative notions of natives and visitors that intersected with shifting and fluid constructions of ethnic identifications.

The jealous neighbour
Kingi’s case was not unique in Mathare. There were many incidents between neighbours, family members and friends that occurred during and right after the period of post-election violence (December 2007- February 2008), and which later received the overarching label of political violence (see also Jacobs 2011). Most of these cases did not, however, reach
court. Accordingly, Kingi's case reveals an aspect of political violence that I have come across in many other incidents that occurred in Mathare during this volatile period. I term this trope 'the jealous neighbour' following the regularity with which people in Mathare drew on this imaginary to explain multiple and diverse moments of violence. The term neighbour is opaque in and of itself, and was often used by local residents to qualify many different types of social relationship. The neighbour could be the person(s) next-door, or someone living in the same alleyway, block or building. It also often referred to people staying in the same area or ghetto village, and could even describe friendships, family relationships and other social ties that did not necessarily emanate from actually living in each other's vicinity. The neighbour could be both friend and foe, and more often than not these aspects were embodied by the same person(s) in different temporal and spatial contexts. Accordingly, at different junctures, the label of neighbour typified different relationships that intersected with ever-changing notions of us and them that were tied to similarly shifting notions of belonging and entitlement.

I have not been able to interview Kingi's neighbour and discuss his version of events and his reasons for acting as he did. He has not told anyone in Mathare, including his brother, where he and his family swiftly moved to after he had been evicted. However, in terms of his motivation for acting as he did, most neighbours and Mama J shared the view that he had been driven by jealousy and a desire to extort money from Kingi. Jealousy was often evoked by local residents in Mathare as the impetus for people's behaviour, and Mama J defined it as follows:

"Here in ghetto, you always look at what other people have, their style, and you want to have that too. It is like you want to have other people's things so you can show you are doing ok, that you don't have problems. So you want things to show people your class. Higher than your class. But, yeah... we also hide if we have good things because people think you are doing good, better than them, they start asking you for things. Ha ha, like the watch you bought for Kingi, for his birthday. You thought he had lost it but he can't wear it in ghetto, what if people think he is of a higher class? They think we are doing good, better than them. They can even put juju ('witchcraft' in Sheng), but we don't believe in that, but it happens in ghetto, all the time. To bring you down [...] Also when you start business and the other person, your friend, you start at the same time, but you do well and the other business goes down. They are jealous and say it is juju. But you know what happens? Here in ghetto we don't like to support business from friends because we don't want them to move up. You have to stay down with
the rest of us. With Kingi, they see him up, and many people feel jealous [...] No, they don't think it is juju, they think it is you ha ha ha. You made him go up. And you know it is not true, but people think you pay everything for us.

Almost all of the young men I worked with from different ethnic backgrounds shared with me that their mothers or grandmothers had made small cuts on their bellies when they were toddlers to supposedly protect them from jealousy. By this, they meant spells that could make small children ill. Apparently, boys elicited more jealous gazes than girls, as this practice was mainly carried out to protect them. Jealousy was a common theme, and the jealous neighbour was a popular imaginary that people evoked when discussing and analysing social incidents. Major events (such as illnesses, the loss or success of a business and even death) were often explained using the trope of witchcraft that, according to many local residents, was intrinsically linked to jealousy. Relationships between most neighbours were often fraught with mistrust and were to be navigated with caution. At the same time, neighbours depended on each other for security, electricity, privacy and so on, and also engaged in relationships of trust. Balancing the thin line between demonstrating a certain status, or class as Mama J put it, and what was considered to be dangerously boastful remained a constant challenge in navigating these potentially perilous relationships. Accordingly, many people in Mathare were set on hiding their problems by performing swag on the one hand, but without trying to entice (too much) jealousy on the other.

The population density in the ghetto, the overcrowded one-room houses and the ensuing intimacy between neighbours also contributed to the potential volatility of social relations in Mathare. In the case discussed above, the neighbour temporarily constructed Kingi as them instead of us. He had tried to mobilise the other tenants against him by drawing on the dominant hate narrative that cast Kikuyu people as criminals and ethnic chauvinists, which was a narrative that gained considerable leverage in the political domain in the run-up to the 2007 elections (e.g. Klopp & Kamungi 2008; Kagwanja 2009). Strikingly, Kingi eventually overcame his predicament purportedly because most tenants perceived him as us. Another process of othering seemed to have traversed the putative social divisions based on ethnicity evoked by the neighbour. Like Kingi, the majority of the other tenants considered themselves, and were considered to be, natives in Mathare, whereas the neighbour and his wife had only arrived recently in the ghetto and were widely taken as visitors. When I discussed this case with a neighbour called Chalo, he pointed to the significance of the fact that Kingi was considered to be a mzaliwa ('native' in Kiswahili).

He was born here, in Mathare. His Shosho, she lives here, and his mother also lived here. He is from an old family in ghetto. You see these young boys, they helped him fight. They even wanted to do mob justice. They helped him [...] No, not because he is a Kikuyu like them, no, because he is mzaliwa like them. They also come from this mtaa, and they know him growing up. Also for us,
we are born here. Others come later, they are not from here. They don't know
us like we know each other.

Even though Kingi had been born in Mathare (or at Pumwani hospital near Mathare), he
had not been raised there. He spent his early childhood at his mother's house in Kangemi,
which was a more rural ghetto west of Nairobi city centre. Nevertheless, many took him,
and he considered himself to be, a mzaliwa, because his grandmother had lived in the
ghetto since the late 1960s, and because he had been the informal leader of the first
chang’aa gang there. Moreover, Kingi was known to be the illegitimate son of a locally
famous man who had established one of the first homesteads in Bondeni Village during the
1960s (see Chapter 1). This all leads to the following questions: who were imagined as
wazaliwa ('natives' in Kiswahili), by whom, when and why? How did this notion relate to
shifting constructions of wageni ('visitors' in Kiswahili)? And how was this linked to
shifting constructions of us and them based on ethnicity and locality?

Fights between friends
A few weeks before the December 2007 elections, Kingi had decided to stop distilling
chang’aa for his grandmother and left the One Touch gang for good. His chicken business
and the roadside restaurant were making enough to sustain his family and required his full
attention. A few months prior to this decision, he had moved from a tin-roofed and mud
wall house down the valley to a one-room house on the sixth floor of a stone building
nearer to Juja Road. The room was still the same size as the old house, but it did not flood
when it rained, was not plagued by rats and snakes, and had electricity throughout the day
and night. Moreover, it was safe to use the toilet on the corridor at night, and the couple did
not have to queue at the communal tap each morning as there was a water tap on each
floor. Kingi was literally and symbolically moving up in the valley, and this sparked
jealousy among many in Mathare, not just in neighbours, as we saw above, but also among
a few of the One Touch gang members who felt left behind. These men had been Kingi’s
best friends, and some of them, like Petero, had started the One Touch gang with him and
had been part of his posse or riika ('a small group that stayed together after circumcision).

Right before the 2007 elections, a few One Touch gang members led by Motion and
Petero, who were both long-standing friends of Kingi, visited the latter’s hotelli to warn him
that the business would be theirs after election day. They told him that they had a right to
his property because the ODM (the Orange Democratic Movement – Cheeseman 2008; De
Smedt 2009) would win, and, as Kingi paraphrased it, "the time for the Kikuyu was over, to
have everything while the rest suffered, that time would be over when a Luo man [Raila
Odinga] would be president." Petero’s mother had a Kikuyu background and his father was
Luo. Strikingly, Petero did not really know his father and, other than Sheng, he only spoke
the Kikuyu language. Yet he identified mostly as Luo. During the Mungiki control of
Bondeni, he had used his fluency in this language to work with its members, but because he
strongly identified as Luo he never became a full member. Nevertheless, he did access some
of the opportunities this group had to offer, for instance, managing a small pawn shop that
was backed by the Mungiki where residents could pawn valuable items such as mobile phones. After the Mungiki gang’s demise in Bondeni, Petero had lost this business and became addicted to *chang’aa*. I wanted to talk to him to understand why he had attacked Kingi, but he refused to speak to me, which Kingi thought was because he was ashamed. Kingi again evoked the trope of ‘the jealous neighbour’ to explain why one of his best friends had turned against him. Petero’s brief life-story here shows how contingent ethnic identifications in Mahare possibly were in practice, and this again reveals the need for contextualisation. Petero had foregrounded his Kikuyu identification when it provided him with access to opportunities provided by the Mungiki, but downplayed it and foregrounded his Luo background when he joined Motion and the others to threaten, and later attack, Kingi.

Election day on 27 December 2007 passed without a presidential winner being declared. The first skirmishes in Mathare occurred early the following day when groups of young men started to vent their frustration over contradictory reports, rumours of rigging and the delay in announcing the official results (*see also* Wallis & Nguyen 2007). Until late at night, Raila Odinga had been leading the exit polls (Hornsby 2012:758), which was in line with his slight lead in a majority of the prognoses published ahead of the elections (*see also* Hornsby 2012:757; Agina et al. 2007). However, early on the Friday morning, Kibaki seemed to undergo a resurgence. For the next two days, tensions culminated in a few fights here and there. However, Bondeni Village was plunged into widespread chaos when Kibaki was hurriedly inaugurated late on Sunday afternoon on 30 December 2007 (Gettleman 2007). At dusk, groups of young men wielding crude weapons, such as clubs and machetes, barricaded the high street that separated Lower and Upper Bondeni, and started looting businesses and houses near the river. Most residents from down the valley escaped to the main road, where they set up camp for the night, still unaware that they would be displaced for months to come. Motion, Petero and their group came back and destroyed Kingi’s roadside restaurant, looted all the equipment and violently chased Kingi from the premises. Later that week, I met Kingi in the city centre to give him food supplies and other items he had asked for, and he shared the following with me:

We don’t sleep, it is me and the other guys (from his block), we stay outside. My whole family is in my house, they have to stay indoors, no one can go outside, it is not safe. We see a lot of bodies. I even saw fingers, cut off, just there and there, in the sewer. Nobody knows what is going on in *mtaa* (‘ghetto’ or ‘neighbourhood’ in Sheng), it is a war. And we don’t sleep because we have to guard so that they don’t come to our side, ha ha ha we hide behind some stones, you know those stones near the flat, so they can’t see us...and we are ready for them...we have some *rungus* (‘clubs’ in Kiswahili) and *pangas* (‘machetes’ in Kiswahili). We are with many ha ha ha so they can’t come, our side is still ok. But down there, where Shosho lives, I can’t go there. They party all night, they roast *mbuzi* (‘goat’ in Swahili) and we hear them. There is a lot of fighting going on, people shout and things...
are very insecure. They (a few One Touch gang members) took some houses and they have looted the shops. Ha ha ha, I have to buy unga (maize meal in Swahili) from them for 250 bob, why? There is no cabbage, we only eat ugali (a porridge of maize meal in Kiwahili) once a day. I sometimes sleep during the day when things are calm [...] I can’t believe what is happening in my village. I never expected them (friends and fellow gang members) to fight us like this. I think it’s because they are jealous because we own houses and the businesses and they work for us (Kikuyu alcohol bosses like Shosho). They came before election and you know who, they told me that my hotelli will belong to them after election time. They looted my hotelli but did not burn it.

Tensions between visitors
As well as looting Kingi’s hotelli, Motion had also attacked another long-term friend and fellow One Touch gang member, Odhis, who identified as Luo. His chang’aa bar had also been ransacked and looted by Motion and his friends, and Odhis still carries the scars on his face from a machete wielded by Motion. Motion had almost hacked his entire ear off. When I asked him about Motion’s reasons for seemingly suddenly turning against him, Odhis, like Kingi, thought that Motion had been jealous, and that he had seen the 2007/8 post-election violence as an opportunity to, in his words, “finish competition and settle old grudges.” As analysed in the previous chapters, all of the young One Touch gang members struggled to leave the gang and follow in the footsteps of Kingi and Odhis, but competition was fierce and opportunities rare. According to them, the resentment Motion allegedly harboured against Kingi and Odhis emanated first and foremost from their success, and not from their respective ethnic identifications. However, Motion did explain their differences with regard to success in ethnic terms.

Motion and Odhis were around the same age, and had even arrived in Mathare from Kisumu around the same time. They had been neighbours in Bondeni and had become gang members together. In contrast to Motion, however, Odhis had married a woman with a Luo background who had been born in Mathare and who had a wide network of family members, friends and neighbours there she could rely on. He had been able to access loans through his wife, as she was a leading member of several savings groups. This had helped him to build a small, but thriving, chang’aa business outside the gang. As discussed in previous chapters, many men accessed opportunities through the women in their lives. Kingi had also enjoyed financial and other types of support provided by his grandmother, and had been able to gradually build his businesses outside the gang with additional help from his wife. Motion had lacked some of the financial and other types of support that Odhis and Kingi had received from wives and other family members.

Strikingly, Motion grasped the difference in success between them and himself in ethnic terms, even with regard to Odhis who had a Luo background like Motion. In my discussions with Motion, he claimed that Odhis had learned to act like a Kikuyu, because his wife had been born in Mathare and, 'despite her Luo background', had adapted to what
Motion imagined as a dominant Kikuyu culture. This was a common narrative among alleged *wageni* (‘visitors’ in Kiswahili) with Luo backgrounds to explain differences in wealth between purported natives and visitors. Its mainstay held that Luo people who had been born in Mathare had lost part of their ostensible ‘Luoness’ by mimicking Kikuyu *wazaliwa* (‘natives’ in Kiswahili). Boss, a 29-year-old man from 4B with a Luo background who had been born in Mathare, said the following:

They take us like a Kikuyu because we also buy houses here in ghetto ha ha ha like a Kikuyu. You see my father, he lived with Kikuyu and know that houses in ghetto bring money. Other Luo they come later and they like to work, not do business. They invest in *ocha* (rural area in Sheng). They say we are not like real Luo because like Kikuyu we like business too [...] Yah I am circumcised. Ha ha ha. I can talk in front of people here. When they say, don’t listen to him he is not a man. Others say, ’No he is circumcised’. I feel proud.

Boss told me that he did not feel any less Luo, but he took himself as a Mathare native, and claimed that this, to him, meant that he was well adapted to ghetto dynamics. He did bring out that he imagined the ghetto dynamics to be Kikuyu, which was evidenced by his phrase: “You see my father, he lived with Kikuyu.” Yet he did not take this as being in conflict with identifying as Luo. He had grown up with friends (with different ethnic backgrounds) who had almost all been circumcised, and this had led to him also undergoing this practice (see Chapter 2). This reveals that identifying as ‘being ghetto’ and having an ethnic background were not exclusive positions; these positions related to one another, and these time and space-bound relationships require more analysis in order to further contextualise the contingencies of ethnicity in social relations.

Boss had followed in his father’s footsteps by becoming a landlord of two tin-roof shacks in 4B. This was a position most residents constructed as Kikuyu, despite the fact that many landlords had Luo and other ethnic backgrounds. The reason why many imagined this position to be Kikuyu emanates from the master narrative that conceives people with Kikuyu backgrounds as property owners and business people. Due to the history of settlement there, this conceptualisation of people with Kikuyu backgrounds resonated with many people’s experiences in Mathare. As described in Chapter 1, the majority of the early residents in Mathare had migrated from nearby native reserves and settlers’ farms, many of whom had identified as Kikuyu. In the beginning, it had still been relatively easy to access the right to construct informal houses there and lease them to other migrants. In later years, however, it had become increasingly difficult for people to become landlords. Available housing and land have become scarce over the past few decades, and people could only access such informal assets if they were connected to influential individuals such as village elders and the chief. Boss, for instance, had become a landlord through his father’s connections. Motion and other residents who had not been born and raised in Mathare often lacked the skills, knowledge and connections to navigate the highly intricate labyrinth of social relations and access such resources.
Over the years, I have talked to many people who, like Motion, were considered to be visitors by self-proclaimed natives. Many of these supposed visitors described their failure and other people’s success in ethnic terms, especially when it concerned the success of purported natives who were identified by them as Kikuyu. They often did not consider themselves to be visitors, but they also did not view themselves as permanent residents, and many drew boundaries between themselves and what they took to be ‘real ghetto people’, which was a term they used often to refer to self-proclaimed natives. According to a young man from 4B called Ouma, real ghetto people had Kikuyu backgrounds, lacked moral values and engaged in crime, prostitution and alcohol and drug abuse “without any shame.” In October 2010, we were standing on a ridge in 4B overlooking Mathare, and he pointed fervently to Bondeni. “Look how dirty their houses are, and this village [4B] is clean, but we don’t have their money. They are not decent people.” He told me that Bondeni residents, all of whom he imagined to be Kikuyu, were richer than residents in 4B because they were involved in what he regarded as illegal activities (such as selling chang’aa and sex work). Despite the fact that many residents with Luo (and other ethnic) backgrounds also engaged in these practices, Ouma and many other recent migrants constructed them as Kikuyu. "No, I don’t know Luo who steal" Ouma said, "ha ha, or who sell alcohol. No, we like education and work hard. It is Kikuyu, like in Bondeni, who sell alcohol, and they are prostitutes. They are thieves, and have money because of crime. Not like us, we work...we are decent people." This depiction not only draws on ethnic hate narratives but also on dominant notions of slum dwellers as immoral and criminal, and served to set the ‘temporal ghetto residents’, imagined as Luo, apart from the allegedly ‘real ghetto residents’, imagined as Kikuyu. Ouma and many others who engaged in this type of othering strategically omitted that people with multiple ethnic backgrounds engaged in stealing, selling chang’aa and engaging in sex work. This narrative likewise did not take into consideration the fact that relative wealth disparities between ghetto villages, social groups and individual residents were predominantly caused by diverging access to social and economic opportunities that was largely determined by migration histories and the concentration of resources among a few earlier settlers. This begs the question as to why Ouma, Petero, Motion and others repeatedly turned to dominant discourses on slum dwellers and ethnicity, instead of other available explanatory models, to grasp social differences and legitimise (participation in) acts of violence directed at putative ethnic others.

Talking about ‘political violence’ at the river
After Kibaki’s inauguration on 30 December 2007, Motion became a ringleader of a group of young men who took to the streets of Mathare to demonstrate against the, in his eyes, stolen elections. At the time, it was too dangerous for me to talk to him. He did not have a mobile phone, and I could not go down into Mathare to look for him because young men had barricaded the roads and the military police had cordoned off the main access routes. It took us three years before we were able to discuss his view on the violence and his own involvement in it. We had met and spent time with each other in between, but Motion
evidently needed time before he was able to revisit the post-election violence with me, as he mostly avoided questions on the topic.

When he suddenly brought it up on 12 February 2011, it took me by surprise as he was surrounded not only by a few friends, but also some of his previous victims. We were sitting on a heap of garbage in the middle of the Mathare River near the One Touch distilling spot, surrounded by smoking drums and the smell of the open sewer that ended up in the river beside us. Someone produced a yellow pamphlet issued by the Green Belt Movement campaigning to galvanise support for the court case at the International Criminal Court –ICC– (GBM 2011) against highly placed politicians who were allegedly responsible for whipping-up violence after the 2007 general elections (Waki 2008). This immediately elicited a reaction among a few of the young men who stated that the ICC case reflected incidents that occurred in Rift Valley, and perhaps Kisumu, but entirely ignored what had transpired in Mathare. These young men with Kikuyu backgrounds referred to the fact that Raila Odinga, the main opposition candidate at the time, was not on the infamous 'O-Campo list' of suspects (Al Jazeera 2010), but was held responsible by many Mathare residents for inciting young men who identified as Luo. Motion interjected by stating that Kibaki should also be on the list, and the rest of the men fell silent. Motion, encouraged by alcohol, continued.

He shouted: "You can’t imagine, it was like a war, eeeeh." Cosmos interjected: "You don’t know who is fighting and you just slash here, and there." Motion interrupted him again: "You need to protect yourself." Cosmos shot back: "You can’t believe the things you did, you never think that, ha ha that you can do that...but it was to protect our family, you see. You have to defend your family." Both clearly tried to claim the moral upper hand by taking up a victimhood position. Motion confirmed: "They come to your house, what can you do?" But it had also been a good time for some. He smiled: "For many days, at night it was a party." They both laughed out loud: "We had nyam chom (roasted meat) and cham (alcohol), and it was us in the streets. People really feared us." I asked whether they thought it would happen again. Other young men at the distilling site quietly observed our conversation while continuing to adjust the heat of the fires or just standing around waiting for the drink to be ready. Motion boastfully asserted: "Will it happen again? Of course. But we have to teach those young boys they can’t do like that." This illustrates that these men felt rather ambivalent about the violence. They had protected their families and had fun, but they had also lost friends and properties. Above all, they felt that it had not changed power relations in their favour. Motion pointed to Gjo, a 14 year old boy with a Luo background, who had already dropped out of school to start working at the distilling site. He continued: "We still have nothing, they still have everything." He aggressively pointed to an older man with a Kikuyu background distilling alongside the others. The man averted his eyes and seemingly ignored the remark, but I saw his shoulders tense up. Motion jumped ashore and half-jokingly grabbed the man forcefully by the shoulders while stating: "He is the problem, ha ha ha, they are, they have everything we still have nothing." Cosmos, swaying on his legs and clearly drunk, jumped in to stress the point: "And that is the problem, but a war it did not help us. People really died." Motion and Cosmos sat back
down again. Cosmos concluded: "When I am in the bus to Kisumu, the driver is a Kikuyu. Why? And he knows everywhere. He knows what I don't and it is not even his area. Where are we? We don’t get that chance, so we need to take it."

The way both Motion and Cosmos drew on the master hate narrative on the Kikuyu group, depicting Kikuyu people as thieves (Somerville 2011) and foreigners (see also Wa Wamwere 2003), to explain the violence and legitimise their participation was striking. The older man they had pointed out at that one moment embodied every rich person with a Kikuyu background. This group was believed to have stolen from other ethnic groups to become rich and were thus considered to be standing in the way of the development of other ethnic groups. In reality, this man still distilled chang'aa despite his old age, indicating that he was probably even more deprived of economic opportunities than Motion and Cosmos. This dominant discourse on the Kikuyu label had, however, acquired meaning in the local context of Mathare as a result of the history of migration there, which led to the dominant perception in Mathare that the rich were Kikuyu and the poor Luo (see Chapter 1).

**Motion in motion: shifting sides**

Motion lived with his family on the other side of the river in 4B, where work was scarce and many people lived, even more so than in Bondeni. He shared a nine metre-square room with his wife and two children, his brother and his wife, and their new-born baby. They all slept in a double bed, sideways. He and his brother had been members of the One Touch gang for a long time, and had a significant history of working as alcohol distillers in the more affluent Bondeni Village for predominantly female bar owners with Kikuyu backgrounds. Motion never talked in detail about his participation in actual incidents of violence, but through eyewitnesses I have been able to establish that he and his friends have ousted several families and older women with Kikuyu backgrounds from their homes. Among those targeted by Motion were a few bosses and mothers of fellow gang members. I also learned that he was held responsible for looting most of the shops close to the One Touch distilling site. Mama J told me:

> Even now I fear when I see him [Motion]. I ran to a plot when we heard many men come up the cliffs [near the Manoki toilet, see map]. And we hide, but I tried to open the gate to see to go and look for Kingi. In front of the gate, it was a crowd, and a man cut this man, his head was like a plate, it came off like a plate, a bowl full of blood. He stood but the top of his head, like a plate was on the ground, like a bowl, a bowl of blood, then he dropped down. He [Motion] was there, I know it was him, he was part of that group. I know what he did.

In the tumult that followed Kibaki’s inauguration, Motion and a few Luo friends stole goats from older women with Kikuyu backgrounds in Bondeni (some of whom were their bosses), and feasted on roasted meat and the alcohol they had also confiscated from them.
Up until the elections, Motion, as a One Touch gang member, had worked for many different older Kikuyu female bosses. In the section above, Motion and Cosmos described the initial days after the general election as a “party.” This was an odd choice of words at first glance, given that many people died during the chaos. Yet the looting of goats and alcohol from their female bosses may have been a way of reversing power relations, even if only for a day. Denouncing the Kikuyu group out loud and drawing on the anti-Kikuyu political rhetoric that had gained particular strength in the political domain in the run-up to the 2007 elections seemed to be a way for these young men to stand up to their bosses and break away from the daily grind of back-breaking work for little pay. Indeed, these men generally earned around two Euros a day, while their bosses, the majority of whom had a Kikuyu background, made between 10 and 200 Euros daily.

Motion told me that he had expected to be stopped at any moment by the General Service Unit (GSU), which was the military police in Kenya. He had been surprised when he noticed that local residents with Kikuyu backgrounds began to move away instead of calling on the local administration to arrest him and his friends. Later reports showed that in some cases the local police and administration officials were implicated in whipping-up the violence during the chaos that followed the election (Waki 2008, HRW 2008). Their reluctance to intervene gave Motion and a few other alcohol distillers (with Luo and many other ethnic backgrounds) from the One Touch gang leeway to take over the shopping street inside Mathare, which was a dirt road where most micro-businesses were located, within the space of a few days. They re-dubbed this Mau Mau Avenue ‘Gaza’. This was an intertextual reference, not only to Palestine, but also to dance hall music. It stood in counter-position to Shantit, an area near Bondeni Village that was temporarily renamed the Gullyside. ¹ For the first few nights, Motion and his friends roasted the stolen goats on open fires, drank the stolen alcohol and slept in the houses of residents who had fled to the main road on the fringe of the ghetto. Here the refugees camped in makeshift tents and could see the ‘party’ taking place in the valley below them.

A few days into the unrest, a miller from Bondeni with a Luo background and political connections to the opposition party ODM (Orange Democratic Movement), approached Motion and offered to arm and pay him and the other young men. He had parked a truck full of machetes near his maize mill at the mouth of the ghetto and in full sight of the refugees camping nearby. He asked Motion and his friends to link their efforts, as Motion put it, with another group of young men with mostly Luo backgrounds from 4A, a ghetto village in Mathare on the other side of the river. Otiesh, who was a famous thief from 4A, led this group. This and similar groups were often dubbed the Taliban in (inter)national media representations, and inside the ghetto also had different names such as Siafu (‘killer ants’ in Kiswahili). As Motion explained, the purpose of joining forces was to deter young men from the renamed Gullyside area near the bridge, who he described as

¹ The Gullyside is a term that refers to the famous group of artists in Jamaica headed by Mavado and which competed with the Gaza camp’s collective led by Vybz Kartel. The term Gullyside is a nickname for Brixton in South London, where many Jamaican migrants live, and was supposedly chosen by Mavado and his crew to reflect their hard-core ghetto lifestyle. The term Gaza by Vybz Kartel’s group was intended to trump Gullyside’s display of ghetto toughness (see also, Boyne 2009).
Kikuyu and even Mungiki gang members. These young men from Shantit had not been Mungiki members, as the Mungiki had long left Bondeni, and Shantit members had multiple ethnic backgrounds. Yet, they were named as such by Motion and others because of their supposed shared identity as Kikuyu, and because of the history of the Mungiki gang in Shantit. These were clearly meant as derogatory terms. Shantit gang members had begun to attack the Taliban groups from 4B and 4A at night to push these latter gangs out of Bondeni Village and stop the looting of houses and shops.

By joining the Taliban gang that was led by Otiesh during the 2007/8 post-election violence, Motion had been able to sell stolen goods and accumulate just enough money to start distilling his own alcohol. He later described the moment he accepted being armed by the miller and joined Otiesh’s Taliban gang as a turning point in his life. He also claimed that it had literally taken him only minutes to decide. In this brief period of time, he had evaluated his past life and the present chaos, and began to anticipate possible new social horizons in which he saw himself becoming a senior man according to popular notions of manhood (Willemse 2009:218). However, looking back, Motion could not pinpoint a clear, rational moment when he decided to leave the One Touch gang and participate in the mounting violence. If anything, it was a gradual process marked by extreme chaos and quick power shifts, high risks and uncertain outcomes. In the overall confusion, a series of smaller events (stealing and eating goats and alcohol to party –kuraha in Sheng) and the absence of others (no GSU to arrest him and his friends) produced a growing space for him and a few friends to gradually take control of Lower Bondeni Village. Compelled by a desire to meet his own immediate needs (protecting his family, for instance), Motion navigated the rapidly changing circumstances inside the ghetto to his own advantage. He improvised as he went along, without a clear picture in mind of where he was heading, although he was guided by a strong desire to become a senior man. In retrospect, he identified the incident with the miller as the moment it began to dawn on him that taking part in this conflict could mean a radical change from his life as a distiller. Yet, it is more likely that his later reflections were based on how he had eventually stepped away from the violence.

When the violence subsided two months after the general elections, which had been held on 27 December 2007, Motion did not stay with Otiesh and his crew at the Vietnam distilling site. He explained to me that he had earned enough (from selling stolen items) to start distilling his own chang’aa, which he began to sell in bulk to customers in Kibera (another major ghetto in Nairobi). He later even opened his own bar in 4B. At the same time, he continued to distil for his old bosses in order to spread the business risks in case his distribution channel to Kibera failed. He did not go into it too much, but it was clear to me that he re-joined the One Touch gang because he preferred to work at a site that he was familiar with and where most of his friends (including the two men he had attacked) hung out. He hardly knew Otiesh and the other gang members from 4A who had taken over the Vietnam distilling site in Bondeni Village. Strikingly, the One Touch gang members accepted Motion back, and he continued his work alongside the young men he had attacked and for bosses he had violently ousted from Bondeni Village. Motion thought he was accepted back because most of the One Touch gang had been his friends. Yet, Kingi told me
that many One Touch gang members and bosses had been afraid of him, and had only taken him back because they had feared the repercussions that refusal might bring.

A street-smart visitor
The binary between visitors and natives emerged in 2002, and, in this popular imaginary, the latter were often separated from the former by referring to the year 1982. In this view, the term visitor in Bondeni denoted people who had arrived in Mathare from the rural area after an attempted coup in 1982 (see also Throup and Hornsby 1998:31), which was a watershed moment in the lives of people in Mathare. During the failed coup, many people from the area had gone on to the city streets to loot shops. When the Moi government had restored order, the GSU regiments had conducted door-to-door searches of houses. During these raids, they confiscated stolen goods (such as TVs, carpets, radios and mattresses), and had beaten and arrested a great many people. The crackdown had taken days, and had a lasting impact because it had been the first time (of many) that the GSU had been widely deployed inside the ghetto. In popular imaginary, the period before this coup was characterised by homesteads, malaya prostitution and busaa bars. From the 1980s onwards, however, chang’aa gradually replaced busaa and malaya prostitution was increasingly superseded by a short-call service (see Chapter 1). The eventful year of 1982 thus proved to be a fruitful landmark when it comes to capturing the memory of significant changes that occurred during the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a consequence, the imagined differences between before and after the 1982 coup gave strength to notions of natives and visitors in more recent times. This binary emerged around 2002 in response to the intensification of ethnicity in social relations that was sparked by the growing influx of migrants and the emergence of ethnic-based gangs. Looking closely at this imagined boundary, however, reveals its shaky underpinnings. For instance, I have met many residents who took themselves and were considered to be natives who had arrived in Mathare after 1982 or had been born from parents who had done so.

Looking at the time and space-bound intersections of ethnicity with the popular binary forged between wazaliwa (‘natives’ in Kiswahili) and wageni (‘visitors’ in Kiswahili) brings us closer to understanding why, for instance, Motion participated in the violence and shifted alliances, even if only momentarily. Motion drew upon ethnic hate narratives to explain his position of multiple marginalities (see also Vigil 2003) and legitimise participation in direct violence against imagined others. Yet, these others did not all have Kikuyu backgrounds. Nevertheless, Motion bestowed on Odhis an alleged Kikuyuness, which is a form of ethnicity that one can acquire by association. In response to the foregrounding of ethnicity by putative visitors, self-proclaimed natives reinforced the ghetto as a locus of belonging. Nevertheless, they also drew on ethnic stereotypes by fixing visitors as ‘tribalists.’ This highlights how ready-available ethnic narratives were to people in their attempts to grasp putative differences between social groups. It also describes how notions of ethnicity acquired different meanings in different contexts and among different (groups of) people. The contextualisation of ethnicity is thus crucial to understanding the ambiguity of such notions and grasping if, when, where, why and how these shaped
conceptions of us and them. The need for such nuanced analysis is underscored by the fact that the binary between natives and visitors did not neatly intersect with ethnicity or locality, and potentially shifted according to changing power dynamics. For instance, not all residents with a Luo background in Bondeni, 4B and 4A were considered to be visitors, or saw themselves as temporary residents. Moreover, not all residents with a Kikuyu background living in Bondeni Village saw themselves and were perceived as natives, and so on.

From all this, one might get the impression that the residents in Mathare only identified with two ethnic groups, whereas the ghetto was in fact marked by ethnic diversity and many residents did not even know their ethnic origins or had multiple ethnic backgrounds. In everyday encounters, people did refer mostly to the Kikuyu and Luo labels when commenting on purported asymmetrical power relationships. This probably emanated from the fact that the two main political contenders in Mathare for the past ten years represented political parties that were constructed as either Luo or Kikuyu in the popular discourse (see also Somerville 2011). As noted, this did not indicate that the local representative had to identify with the same ethnic background as the one widely associated with the respective political party. On the contrary, Bishop Wanjiru identified as Kikuyu, but as she competed for an ODM seat in the 2007 elections was imagined in Mathare to be the ‘Luo candidate’.

To complicate matters further, Motion was considered by some from Bondeni (like Kingi) to be a *mgeni* (‘visitor’ in Kiswahili), yet he was taken as a native by others. He and a few of his brothers had arrived during the 1990s when Motion had been around nine years old, and he had been part of different gangs since the day he set foot in Mathare. Accordingly, most of his peers did not take him to be a (total) newcomer. Nevertheless, residents in Bondeni who, like Kingi, belonged to families that had lived in the ghetto for decades still regarded Motion as a visitor. This highlights how relational and situational these notions were, and how they potentially shifted per spatial, social and temporal context and in relation to different boundary-making projects.

The popular notions of natives and visitors often coincided with the putative dichotomy between *mjanja* (‘street-smart hustler’ in Sheng) and *fala* (‘victim or stupid/backward person’ in Sheng and Kiswahili). It is not surprising that people who regarded themselves as having been born in the ghetto also saw themselves as streetwise hustlers (or *mjanja* in Sheng), and considered visitors to be stupid or backwards. These constructions further tied in with the way that many in Mathare drew from discourses on the ‘urban’ versus the ‘rural’ and on the ‘modern’ versus the ‘traditional’, in which the rural was equated with backwardness and traditions and vice versa. Visitors were widely assumed to still have strong connections to family ‘up country’ and, as such, to ethnicity, and this was considered to be *ufala* (‘backwardness’ in Sheng) by self-proclaimed natives. Although Motion was regarded as a *mgeni* in Bondeni by residents like Kingi, he was also widely taken as a *mjanja* in both 4B and Bondeni because he was a known thief and long-term member of the One Touch gang. Certainly, no one would dare to dispute his reputation as a streetwise hustler. Motion took great pride in being, as he termed it, *janjess*
['streetwise' in Sheng], and often took me on a tour through the ghetto to show me different bars and friends who all treated him with respect and some even with visible fear.

In the end, other One Touch gang members who had likewise briefly joined Taliban groups during the 2007/8 post-election violence also returned to the One Touch gang after the violence ended, but this did not mean that things went back to normal; tensions abounded, but work continued. Illustrated by Motion’s narrative in the above passage, many people (with Luo backgrounds and otherwise) still explained their marginal position within society by drawing on master hate narratives that imputed the Kikuyu group. Similarly, many people who had suffered from past episodes of violence (also with multiple ethnic backgrounds) were bitter and resentful, with some waiting for an opportunity to retaliate. One might expect that these tensions within the gang would have led to multiple conflicts over the past few years, but something else happened instead; shockingly, four of the nine One Touch gang members who had briefly joined the Taliban groups during the 2007/8 post-election violence died the following year. Kingi explained that to local residents these deaths were clouded in mystery because it was only One Touch gang members who had participated in this violence who died in this brief time-span. The causes of death varied from alcohol poisoning and mental illness to being shot by the police. Kingi told me that he and others thought that: "The blood of their victims haunted them, made them crazy and killed them." To many, these deaths settled a score. The remaining five men, including Motion, continued to be eyed with suspicion by Odhis and other gang members. Yet, Motion in particular had a vast network of bar owners, thieves and customers, both in- and outside the ghetto. He could thus help other gang members to access opportunities to generate income from activities other than distilling, such as brokering stolen goods. Accordingly, it was not only fear that allowed Motion, and others like him, to continue to work at the One Touch distilling site; the fact that these young men could provide access to opportunities also contributed considerably.

Against this background, Motion and Cosmos initiated the outreach programme in October 2010 (see Chapter 3). It is remarkable to consider that a group with such a volatile and complex history was able to collectively engage in a programme that encouraged these men to open up to each other. This tentatively shows a tendency I have also encountered in many other cases: the people in Mathare are highly inter-dependent, and so working with people you do not trust, and who have even harmed you, is often part of local survival strategies. Odhis told me that he did not mind that Motion was part of the programme; he just did not want to be part of a loan group with him when starting a micro-business. Kingi, who managed this programme with Monga, shared that he hoped the scheme would "help Motion to change his mentality." Kingi certainly had a somewhat tolerant attitude towards Motion and the others, which probably emanated from the fact that, compared to Odhis, it had not taken him long to recuperate from the post-election violence. The small but consistent salary he received as a social worker at Safi helped him to replace the items that had been stolen and re-open his roadside restaurant. In contrast, Odhis had no steady income, and he and his wife were left with debts with different loans- and savings groups (see Chapter 5). He later lost two older brothers in a short time-span and had to pay for
both funerals. He never recovered, and took up drinking to drown his sorrows. His drinking eventually hindered his progress as a participant in the outreach programme. Motion also failed the first programme and, at the time of writing this chapter, both he and Odhis were part of a second group of gang members involved in the outreach scheme.

**The Taliban in Bondeni**

The discussion above shows that people in Mathare often drew on dominant discourses on ethnicity to make sense of their own predicaments, imagine shifting boundaries between us and them, and legitimise participation in violence. It also shows that ethnicity on its own is not an adequate trope with which to analyse tensions between people and groups. Ethnicity certainly does not explain why Kingi’s neighbour persecuted him, or why Motion attacked Odhis and Kingi. To understand why and how people negotiated dominant discourses on ethnicity during periods of direct violence in Mathare, it is thus crucial to look at the intersections between ethnicity, locality and the notions of natives and visitors, as well as other time and space-bound identifications, narratives and positions. In a similar vein, ethnicity does not explain the ongoing tensions between 4B and Shantit, even if these two ghetto villages were popularly imagined in ethnic terms (Kaberia 2012). Taking a closer look at the tensions between these two villages – and below an area between Shantit and a place in Bondeni called Kambi na Moto (where the Kiharu gang was located) – will enable us to further understand the shifting roles and meanings of ethnicity as a boundary marker, as well as the other factors contributing to violence in Mathare.

Boss, a *mzwaliwa* from 4B who identified as Luo, told me upon my arrival for a long period of fieldwork in Mathare in July 2010 that I could not meet and work with Otiesh, the Taliban leader from 4A (also called Mradi), as I had planned, as tensions were high after Otiesh and his group had been ousted by Shantit and Kiharu gang members. During the post-election violence in January 2008, Otiesh’s group (also often referred to as the Taliban) had managed to take control of Vietnam, a distilling site in Bondeni near the bridge. Boss thought that the Taliban had been able to establish itself in Bondeni and take over a distilling site there because the crackdown on alleged Mungiki members and thieves by the police over the past decade (see also Alston 2009; Oscar foundation 2008) had decimated the number of young men in this area. As a consequence, in his words, Bondeni "had no youth to defend their area." The extra-judicial killings of suspected Mungiki members and thieves had led to the deaths of hundreds of youths in Mathare, especially in Bondeni Village and Kosovo, as these had been former Mungiki strongholds. Kingi and many Shantit gang members had also told me that the young men from Shantit had tried to resist Otiesh and his group during the post-election violence, but had been outnumbered and could not prevent this particular Taliban gang from expanding its turf. In the years following the 2007/8 post-election violence, Otiesh and his men established an illegal alcohol distilling site, several illegal electricity enterprises, a video hall and some other businesses in Bondeni. According to local residents, they began to manifest themselves in something akin to the way Mungiki gang members had operated between 2001 and 2006.
Residents watched on with suspicion. A young, male gang leader and bar owner called Kevin recounted the following in December 2010:

After post-election violence [2007/8], Taliban took over this side [Bondeni]. They chased Mungiki with the police in 2006, now they copied them, they came like a flood from Mradi. They ask for tax from businesses, also form me, for security, also from houses. They took houses from Kikuyu that were chased [during the post-election violence]. No rent. The Chief supported the Taliban, he thought they were good guys for security. People [local residents] were happy with them. Then they changed, they ask for tax, grab your houses, collecting rent. Like Mungiki, they became the thieves, they rape.

It took well over a year before the tensions that followed the 2007 general elections subsided to a level of relative normality. In 2008, most residents welcomed the security that Otiesh's group restored in Bondeni, and the chief even supported this Taliban gang as an official vigilante group. In April 2009, the Taliban gang members established their own court near Vietnam to punish thieves and settle domestic disputes. This makeshift court was backed by the chief and his village elders, which gave it some kind of legitimacy. Otiesh's Taliban group was allowed to ask for fees, and would refer the more complicated cases (such as land disputes) on to the chief. What is more, this group was also affiliated to the local MP, Bishop Wanjiru. Gang members had acted as security for her during the campaign period in 2007, and after the general elections that year worked as guards at one of the construction sites of her pet project: the widespread construction of community toilets in Bondeni, which she had initiated with government funds (NTA 2011). This Taliban gang in Bondeni thus had powerful political backing, and nothing seemed to stand in the way of its expansion.

However, at the end of 2009, there were two developments that led to this group's demise. I will discuss the first in this section and the second in a section below. The first of these developments was tied to what was widely held to be the excessive violence that this group increasingly applied in punishing local thieves. According to many residents, Otiesh and other Taliban gang members became too powerful, and people began to openly resent their presence in Bondeni. I have been told many narratives of the Taliban’s alleged excesses. Among these, one stood out in particular, as all of the people I talked to mentioned this incident. The date varied according to the narrators, but it probably took place on a day early in November 2009, which was when the Taliban gang members from Otiesh's group burned alive two young thugs from Shantit in front of a large crowd near the bridge. In the weeks that followed, many residents began to shun and spoke ill of the gang. Boss from 4B expounded:

Otiesh, ha ha. He carries a matchbox everywhere, and he doesn't even smoke. That was too much. Mabani ('nasty, mean people/informers' in Sheng and
Kiswahili). They killed so many, just putting fire to them. Not just beating, but fire, you can't imagine. For security. They can do that even to their own. But not in the other side. It is like, they kill youth but they are not from there [Bondeni], and people say, no they cannot come here and kill our youth like this. It is in their blood, that violence. I can't agree. Yes I am a Luo, but I am born here, I can't kill people I know.

Boss described the Taliban gangs as security (or vigilante – Anderson 2002) groups that punished thieves with unrivalled ferocity. This assumed ferocity, however, has to be seen in the context of police brutality, mob justice and other everyday instances of violence in the Mathare ghetto. Strikingly, local residents rarely spoke in shock about police brutality, rape or mob justice, even when they wholeheartedly condemned such actions. Yet, violent acts by Taliban and Mungiki gangs, such as beheading defectors or punishing alleged thieves by setting them on fire while still alive, were discussed in utter disbelief and minute detail. This was probably fuelled by the highly sensationalised media attention such incidents received, which represented these acts and groups as exceptionally cruel and barbaric (see also Kwamboka 2004; Mutua 2014). Most people in Mathare were staunch followers of the daily news shows, and often drew on media narratives to comprehend local developments. The other reason for the disproportionate attention paid to and discussed by people in Mathare with respect to such incidents was connected to the fact they involved organised groups in Mathare; police brutality, rape and mob justice were not organised by established groups within the ghetto. The police did of course operate inside the ghetto, but were popularly imagined as outsiders. Moreover, these actions mainly targeted people such as individual thieves or young women, whereas the Mungiki and Taliban gangs were highly visible collectives that had emerged partly from within the ghetto, and their operations potentially had an impact on all residents. The fear of most residents in relation to these groups is underscored by the fact that during Mungiki rule in Bondeni (2001-2006), people did not even utter the name Mungiki out loud, but used euphemisms instead such as *wazi* (‘rebels’ in Kiswahili), the 'local, local government’ or just plain 'them.'

The Taliban gang at Vietnam had positioned itself strategically at the foot of the bridge that connected 4B and Bondeni in order to curb crime at what was locally taken to be the hottest crime spot inside Mathare. Supported by other Taliban gangs from 4B, and with political backing, Otiesh and his group expanded their turf and intensified their harsh measures to restore security deep inside Bondeni. As noted, many residents initially condoned what Otiesh and his group did to increase security. Yet resistance grew when the Taliban began to kill suspected thieves rather than just beating them up. Interestingly, the fact that the Taliban members mostly identified as Luo, and many gang members from Shantit as Kikuyu, moved to the foreground in the way people understood the emerging tensions. In the words of a resident to whom I spoke long after the Taliban had been expelled from Bondeni: "We are Kikuyu, most of us here, on this side. Luo, they stay on the other side, they can't come here and kill our boys." In this vein, the word ‘our’ not only
referred to boys who were born and raised in Bondeni, but also to shared ethnic identifications that intersected with notions of local belonging. Accordingly, these ethnic references helped to articulate and accentuate divisions between us and them, but did not cause them. The dominant reason why these divisions gained strength was linked to the level of violence with which the Taliban gang members took up their role as vigilantes.

**Ethnic identifications during conflict**

During different volatile periods, such as the 2007/8 post-election violence, ethnic identifications were brought to the fore in political and social relationships in Mathare. This was not a linear process of growing ethnic animosities because, even during moments of violence marked by intensified ethnic identifications, other axes of identification intersected with these positions. During other conflicts, ethnicity did not play any role (see previous chapter). However, media representations and civil society reports took the growing importance of ethnicity in the run-up to, during and in the aftermath of the 2007 general elections at face value and saw it evidenced by the manifestation of ‘ethnic enclaves’ in Nairobi’s ghettos (*e.g.* HRW 2008; KNCHR 2008). It is true that many people with a Kikuyu background were, for instance, violently ousted from 4B, and did not return to this ghetto village after the violence subsided. Yet, 4B and the other similar ghetto neighbourhoods where this violence took place can hardly be called ethnic enclaves given the fact that people with multiple ethnic backgrounds (including Kikuyu) continue to reside there. At the same time, political affiliations did not follow assumed ethnic identifications, as both young men with Luo backgrounds from 4B and their counterparts with Kikuyu backgrounds from Kosovo supported Bishop Wanjiru, the ODM Starehe MP who had a Kikuyu background. The pertinent question, however, is whether (and if so how) people in Mathare experienced the growing importance of ethnic identification as a result of the 2007/8 post-election violence. Furthermore, what role did ethnic identifications play in the gang wars that marked the run-up to the 2013 general elections?

As noted, Boss considered himself to be a *mzwaliwa*, and identified as both ghetto and Luo. He also told me that the post-election violence in January 2008 had made him, as he put it, “realise” his own ethnic background as well as that of others. Interestingly, I had observed him shift between these two positions ever since I met him in 2003, yet after the post-election violence he related these shifts to this period of conflict. In the above, he clearly foregrounded his ‘nativeness’ by separating himself from young Luo *wageni* from 4B who, in his opinion, were prone to violence. As he brought out, he could not engage in that kind of violence against people with whom, in his words, “he had grown up.” Although he now lived in 4B and was deeply connected to the Taliban gangs, he had also lived in Bondeni and had played football and attended school with youths from all over Mathare. Boss told me that he still felt “very comfortable” walking through Bondeni to 4B, even after the post-election violence and the expulsion of the Taliban:

I know all of them on this side. They know me, you see. Yesterday, this woman she came from the market. She asked a man, a Luo, she is a Kikuyu, to help her
carry the *gunia* (‘a large sack to carry groceries with’ in Kiswahili) down. Two thieves, just here, they came to steal and beat the Luo man. The woman she screamed, so some people came and I was also there. They took one thief and beat him, knocked his head. The Luo man, he was bleeding, and some people say the woman she was part of the thieves so they wanted to kill her. The Luo man he said no, she is not one of them. But they did not listen and started to beat the woman. I stopped it. If I had not been there it could have been a war.

Boss undoubtedly exaggerated his role here, but other sources confirmed to me that he did have strong connections to groups in 4B and Bondeni and he would have been able to talk to the crowd to quell such an emerging clash. What is interesting about this incident and narration is that Boss separated himself from the young men who had crossed the bridge immediately after hearing about the incident. He had also rushed from 4B, but to stop an impending conflict rather than to take part in it. Boss, in this vein, was not so different from many of the other young men I had worked with over the years who identified as Luo and natives. During the post-election violence in January 2008, he had taken part in several looting sprees of ‘Kikuyu’ owned shops with other Taliban gang members. He had, however, also rescued a woman with a Kikuyu background in Bondeni, namely the mother of Monga (colleague to Kingi, see Chapter 3), who had been his childhood friend. What is more, there were several young men who identified as both native and Luo who had grown up in Bondeni and were members of Shantit gangs, whereas these gangs were generally imagined as Kikuyu. Boss confirmed that these young men had also fought against the Taliban (Otish and his group at Vietnam) during both the 2007/8 post-election violence and the clashes that had ousted the Taliban gang from Bondeni in 2009-2010. This again shows that ethnic identifications cannot be taken at face value, and should always be analysed in conjunction with other identifications and in the context of specific time and space-bound conflicts.

Similar to Boss, Kingi likewise explained that he became more aware of his ethnic identification as a result of the 2007/8 post-election violence. He claimed fervently and frequently that he predominantly identified as ghetto, as he put it, and like Boss his first language was Sheng and not the Kikuyu tongue. Both Boss and Kingi recognised the Mungiki control (2002-2006) as a prime cause for the intensification of ethnic identification among many young men in Mathare. During that time, only young men and women who identified with the Kikuyu group were allowed membership. Many people with a Kikuyu background had foregrounded their ethnic identification to access the opportunities offered by the Mungiki. The opposite was the case for Kingi; although he had a Kikuyu background and could have enjoyed great benefits from affiliating with the Mungiki gang, its presence in Bondeni had made him feel somewhat ambivalent about his ethnic background. Mungiki leaders had often tried to recruit Kingi because of his leadership skills and because he said he “did not drink *chang’aa* like most men in Bondeni.” Yet, he strongly resisted these recruitment attempts, and avoided Mungiki hangouts for years in his own neighbourhood. He did not approve of the ways the Mungiki gang had
manifested itself in Bondeni, and was utterly opposed to the multiple taxes he and others had to pay this group. The Mungiki presence in Bondeni thus compelled Kingi to foreground his identification with the ghetto pride position and downplay his ethnic background. Yet, his experiences during the post-election violence had made him aware that his Kikuyu background had become increasingly relevant to others and, as a consequence, also to himself:

It is weird. Before, we [young ghetto men in Bondeni] were just ghetto. Eeh, most of us we were Kikuyu, but we only spoke Kikuyu with our mothers. Today, I feel ghetto, but I also feel Kikuyu. My best friends, they attacked me because of jealousy, also because I am a Kikuyu. That is what they say. When you hear: 'Kikuyus are thieves'. 'We must kill Kikuyus'. And they are your own friends. You feel something. It is not good. That friendship ended, there and there. How can you be friends when they attack you, and you have to buy unga ('maize meal' in Kiswahili) from them for 200 bob ('Kenyan Shilling' in Sheng)? [...] No, I can't revenge. It is not in me. But your heart changes.

Boss and Kingi both struggled equally with what in their view seemed to be the growing importance of ethnic identification in social interactions and political dynamics in Mathare. The way shifting notions of ethnicity increasingly served as boundary markers between different groups traversed their shared identification with ghetto pride.

The intersections between shifting notions of belonging and ethnicity gained strength as a result of, and also fuelled, consecutive junctures of direct violence over the past decade. During the first decade of the new millennium there were more violent conflicts inside Mathare than during the 1990s. Accordingly, self-proclaimed natives imagined a past of shared ghettiness, and blamed visitors such as Mungiki leaders and young men with Luo backgrounds for, as Boss put it, "injecting ethnic hatred in our people." By "our people", Boss denoted alleged natives who had sided with alleged visitors. The language most people in Mathare drew on in constructing these notions derived from majimboism, which is the discourse on ethnicity and citizenship propagated by the Moi government (see Chapter 1). This discourse fixed ethnic groups as belonging to specific regions and as foreign to other areas within the Kenyan nation state. As noted, putative visitors in Mathare did not necessarily affirm this label, but they also imagined boundaries between themselves and those they considered to be real ghetto residents (as brought out by Ouma above). This boundary was first and foremost marked to them by assumed moral standards. The Taliban in Bondeni thus flipped the notion that 'ruralness' equalled backwardness and instead imagined that people from the rural area were the harbingers of morality in order to legitimise their harsh measures against Shantit thieves.

After the Taliban had been expelled, the gangs in Shantit grew in strength, and their actions triggered a series of violent conflicts that marked the run-up to the 2013 elections. A closer look at these conflicts will shed more light on how notions of ethnicity became more dominant in processes of othering by self-proclaimed natives.
Continuous strife over turf
The second development that undermined Taliban control in Bondeni Village concerned the strengthening of the Shantit gangs that were involved in stealing inside Mathare. A new generation of gang members gradually emerged in Shantit during the period of Taliban control of Vietnam. These smaller gangs followed the former Mungiki gangs in setting up networks between different groups in Shantit and with gangs in other ghetto areas in Eastlands. The younger brothers and nephews of the escaped or killed suspected Mungiki members and criminals in 2007 had learned from the Mungiki that power depended on networking beyond the baze and ghetto village. One of their leaders elaborated:

These young thugs, ha ha, there is no one to supervise them. They are just there, and the parents, mostly they are single mothers. They are happy to see what they can bring home. You saw them, ha ha ha, they are so young, very young boys. They connect with thugs from D (‘Dandora’ in Sheng, a ghetto in Eastlands), Bangu (‘Kariobangi’ in Sheng, a ghetto in Eastlands), even Mlango (a ghetto village in Mathare) and you cannot stop them. They get assistance, and they are strong.

Strikingly, he was one of the leaders, but spoke of Shantit gang members as “they.” I had encountered this many times before, generally among people who did not want to disclose to me that they were involved in activities that were widely condemned by fellow ghetto residents. Networks of thieves across different Eastlands’ ghettos were not a new phenomenon. However, it was the young age of its members that especially surprised most of the people with whom I discussed this emerging network. All expressed great concern about this. In the absence of fathers, the loss of a generation of older brothers and cousins had prompted many young (mostly) boys in Shantit to take up what were widely considered to be male responsibilities at a very young age. Indeed, some had only recently been circumcised and were around 16 years old. They took care of their single mothers and younger siblings, and sometimes were already married and had children. To meet the needs of their families, some of these young boys graduated early on from petty theft to armed robbery. In the three years between the expulsion of the Mungiki and the demise of the Taliban in Bondeni, the Shantit gangs became stronger and posed a growing challenge to the Taliban. In response, the Taliban deployed increasingly harsh measures to curb crime at the bridge, protect residents from 4B who passed there daily, and control its own turf.

After the Taliban killed two alleged thieves in plain view and broad daylight by setting them on fire, Shantit gang members went to the Kiharu distilling site for help. One of the Shantit men who had been killed by the Taliban had been the cousin of a member of the Kiharu gang. They took up clubs and machetes and went to Vietnam where, by surprise, they attacked Taliban gang members distilling alcohol near the river. Other Bondeni residents spontaneously joined the clash and set fire to the businesses developed by the
Taliban. Taliban gang members from 4B came to support their peers in Bondeni, but soon the crowd of angry residents overwhelmed this group, and all of the Taliban members fled across the bridge to 4B and Mradi, never to return.

The attacks and counter-attacks between the Taliban and Shantit gangs reveal that their struggle was primarily prompted by their ambitions to control turfs and resources, and not by ethnic identifications. Ethnic hate narratives were re-imagined to legitimise and understand violence, but did not cause it. Shantit gangs wanted control of the bridge to continue robbing people crossing from one village to the other, whereas the Taliban’s aims were to install security at the bridge for a fee and control illegal electricity and alcohol businesses in Bondeni. These gangs both operated in an area the size of a few football fields, which were turfs that overlapped at the bridge. Their close proximity, and the fact that their operations clashed, triggered mounting conflict between them. Strikingly, both Shantit and Taliban members drew on dominant discourses on ethnicity and citizenship to legitimise their actions. A Shantit gang member and self-proclaimed “native” called Morris told me in February 2013:

This violence, it is in them. Luo, they are so proud, they have something in them, they value education and we [Kikuyu] value business. So they are jealous of us because we have money. They want to come to this side to take our businesses. No! They say we steal, not all of us steal. But they attack all of us, so we need to defend ourselves. Sometimes you need to attack to defend yourself. We are ready for them. This time we are ready for them. Last time, they attacked us, and we were not ready. But now we are ready for them. We buy pangas ('machete' in Kiswahili), even guns, so we are prepared. Let them come this time, they will see what we can do.

Morris brought to the fore very specific stereotypes that are central to the dominant discourses on Kikuyu and Luo labels. As noted, these narratives cast Kikuyu as ‘wealthy thieves and businessmen’ and Luo as ‘proud’, ‘prone to violence’ and ‘highly educated but poor.’ Morris did not mind the stereotype that depicted people with a Kikuyu background as wealthy, but resisted the label theft. At the same time, he reiterated the stereotype of the Luo group to legitimise the preparedness of Shantit gangs for potential violence in the run-up to the 2013 general elections. It is quite striking to see that Taliban gang members were never cast as thieves, whereas many were involved in armed robbery. They did, however, operate outside Mathare. This coincides with the popular framing of crime described in

---

2 Boss told me later that one of the leaders, a right-hand man to Otiesh, had been caught by a few residents when he was walking along Juja Road a few weeks after the violence. This was near the Balozi restaurant in Bondeni, where we were enjoying lunch at the time of our interview. These residents had alarmed a few Shantit and Kiharu gang members who had been given weapons by an influential man in Shantit. He was a former Mungiki leader who had stayed in Mathare and now supported the local gangs for his own political gain: he wanted to become a councillor. The young men trapped the Taliban leader near the Balozi restaurant and hacked him to death. This happened during the day, in full view of people walking on the pavement, and only a few metres away from the Moi Air Force Base.
Chapter 2. Although stealing in general was condemned, stealing inside the ghetto was widely considered to be the highest level of crime imaginable.

After their demise, the Taliban gang members crossed the bridge on several occasions between 2010 and 2013 to attack Shantit gang members and try to stop crime at the bridge and regain their former foothold in Bondeni. Yet their efforts were in vain, as the Shantit gangs had grown strong enough in the meantime to successfully resist these attempts. Crime remained high in the area. Indeed, right after Christmas in 2012, the GSU was briefly deployed by the government to stop the clashes between these rival groups from spilling over into other ghetto villages. A critical moment throughout the ongoing tensions between 4B and Bondeni over security and turf arose when Boss was shot dead by a Shantit gang member following a confrontation over a mobile phone in August 2011. Many thought there was more to this incident, and the ghetto was rife with speculation and tension. People on both sides even feared a repeat of the 2007/8 post-election violence. Boss had been a long-term friend of Monga and Kingi, and they organised a big football tournament to raise funds for the funeral and unite everyone from the different ghetto villages who had been friends with Boss. The Taliban from 4B also accepted the invitation and abandoned any retaliation plans. Strife over turf and security continued nonetheless, and even if this rivalry was often understood (both locally and by media representations) in ethnic terms and analysed in relation to political events (such as elections), it primarily derived from competition between groups of young men eking out a living in harsh conditions.

Conflicts between 'natives'
Kingi and Monga were also involved in other initiatives to bring antagonistic gangs together and involve them in peace-promoting activities. They had teamed up with a group of ex-gang members, who now worked as film makers, social workers and social activists in another ghetto area called Korogocho, to organise what they termed “peace dialogues” (or mazungumzo mtaani, ‘neighbourhood conversations’ in Kiswahili). They had met each other through me in October 2010 when I had visited Korogocho with Kingi. He had been thoroughly impressed by the work going on there; this team had been able to garner peace between feuding gangs in what used to be the most notorious ghetto in Nairobi in terms of crime rates and the small arms trade. As a result of their voluntary work, Korogocho gradually became a safer place. Even though funds were low, this group of young men was set on testing their methods in another volatile urban setting in Nairobi. For two years, Kingi, Monga and Brayo worked together with these men to implement similar dialogues in Mathare, and in doing so acquired the skills and network among gang leaders to bring opponents together and discuss a way forward. They were aware that this was a long-term project, and focused on the most pressing tensions between Shantit and 4B. The impact of these dialogues in terms of reduced conflicts was hard to measure, as many factors were at play. Nevertheless, the readiness of gangs to participate over and over again urged them to continue this work, even without funds. Kingi hoped that this project would eventually contribute to reducing the frequent flare-ups between groups, and help to avoid another
full-blown conflict around the 2013 general elections. He worked hard on this project, until he became implicated in an episode of violence himself in May 2012.

On a Tuesday in May 2012, Morris, a Shantit gang leader I had met a year earlier, took me by the hand to guide me through a maze of rusted iron sheet houses near Mau Mau Avenue in Bondeni. I asked him whether we were in Muoroto, and he looked at me with a strange expression on his face. He told me that Muoroto was over there, pointing out a few houses near a toilet block. I asked him this question, because I was always curious about where people drew boundaries between one area and another. These almost seemed to differ per person. Most people named the smaller areas that constituted Bondeni after hangouts of active gangs in the area, but boundaries between one turf and another were highly contested and shifted almost daily and per person. We were about 50 metres away from the toilet block, and I was again amazed by the micro-localities that existed within ghetto villages. Even though the Muoroto toilet was so close, the ground we stood on was definitely not part of the Muoroto area, hence the funny look on Morris’s face when I had asked him about the name of the locale. At the time, Shantit and Muoroto youths were engaged in a fierce competition over which group should manage the Muoroto public toilet. This competition had intensified existing boundaries, and I asked Morris what name he gave to the area we were standing in. Again, a strange look appeared on his face. “This is Shantit!” he exclaimed. He probably thought it was rather silly to ask the name of the area, because he assumed I already knew as we were waiting to meet Shantit gang members. My problem in Shantit was that there were different gangs and one major distilling site, and apart from this site (which was named Jamaica), all of these gangs and their hangouts were dubbed Shantit. I gradually realised that these smaller gangs all worked together, but initially I was very confused.

We arranged a few wooden benches in a circle, and the 28 Shantit gang members, both young men and women who were all involved in stealing inside Mathare, discussed for an hour or two how they wanted to contribute to ending the conflict with the Taliban in 4B. It was a very difficult session according to Kingi, because they thought the Taliban still worked with the local administration and the administrative police. Most did not believe in reconciliation, and a 17-year-old young man eventually stood up and said:

So many of us are dead. That is unfair. Killed by mob justice, by police...Mabani ('enemies/informants' in local Kiswahili, and by which he meant the Taliban gang). Hah! We have kids, young, so at least we leave our mark, there. Maybe next week, we miss another one, someone who is just sitting here, right now, today. Tomorrow he can be dead. We don't believe in a future anymore. You tell us to change? How? With what? We don't have education.

When he sat back down again, the others cheered him and bumped his knuckles in agreement. A young boy called Wax, who was barely 16, sat next to him, took his hand and
laced his fingers with his. The next night, Wax was brutally murdered by women in Kambi in Bondeni.

That particular night, three young men, including Wax, who were all aged between 16 and 18, were walking back from a successful robbery in Eastleigh at one in the morning. About 500 metres from Shantit in Upper Bondeni, a woman spotted the three youths and saw the loot of a few mobile phones in their hands. She concluded that they had been stolen in Kambi, and thus in– and not outside the ghetto, and started screaming to wake up her neighbours to get them to help her catch the alleged thieves. A few women with machetes in their hands joined her on the street, which was highly lit owing to the big streetlight placed there to contribute to security. They killed Wax while the other two youths escaped to Shantit. The following night, Shantit gangs retaliated by setting houses on fire and raping a few women. Women and young men (including gang members from Kiharu) responded again the following night, and fought long and hard with residents from Shantit. The conflict was spreading quickly, and more and more residents from both areas became involved in the violent nightly clashes. After a few days, the GSU came in and imposed a strict curfew, which was maintained for three weeks. I went to Mathare the day after the first skirmishes and met Morris. His hands were covered in cuts and his knuckles were scraped. He looked exhausted and had bruises all over his face. He took me aside, wide-eyed, and told me:

I can't believe they killed Wax like that. His head was off. His arm...it was just there, hanging. We try and discipline these young boys so they don't steal. That is why I have these wounds. We don't want these boys to steal in our area. Go to the mum, you have to see the mum.

Morris was trying to convince me that he had not participated in the acts of retaliation, but that he had acquired his injuries by disciplining his own gang members. I did not believe him, and felt fear settle in the pit of my stomach. Wherever I was in Bondeni that day, Morris and other young men from Shantit tracked me down and urged me to talk to the family of the deceased. Kingi warned me not to go, because he was afraid they wanted to force me to pay for the funeral. He also did not want me to become more involved, because the situation was quickly getting out of hand, despite the growing GSU presence in the area. The following morning, however, Morris called me, furious:

You tell Kingi we can kill him. He comes to our side to preach peace by day. He comes at night to kill us? No! Eeeeeeeeeeeh! Yah, he was part of the group from Kambi, I tell you! Now, we can only trust you, you have to come to talk to these boys. You have to see the mum.

I was stunned, but managed to tell him that I would ring him back later. Straightaway, I called Kingi. His voice sounded shaken when he picked up the phone.
I did not want to scare you. They think I was there, last night. You know it was Mama Don [Kingi’s cousin], she was part of the women who killed Wax. Last night, she also went there. I can’t believe it is women, they are armed, they have pangas (‘machetes’ in Kiswahili). Now we see everyone is prepared for the elections. And you know Kambi, it is my area, my family, all of them, so now they think I was there. They called me last night, this morning. They tell me to kill me. I was not there. [...] I go to the police to file a report so they know a threat was made. Also, I will call Kinya, he knows so many people in Shantit, he can help me with my case. He can talk to them, tell them it wasn’t me.

I wanted to join him during his visit to the police station, but Kingi told me to stay away from Mathare because he also feared for my safety. I called Morris back and tried to convince him that they had made a mistake. Morris rejected my plea, and told me that he had heard people shout Kingi’s name, and to him this was evidence enough. To him, Kingi had been there in the dark of the night. The big, bright street lantern had somehow been turned off by residents, and so people had not been able to properly see precisely who had been involved. Most residents in Mathare stayed indoors that day, and Kingi and I called many people to piece together exactly what had transpired the night before. After some hours, we finally concluded that Kingi’s nephew, the first born son of his sister, had taken part in the fight. He was also called Kingi. The reason why Kingi had not thought of this possibility earlier in the day was because he had not expected his teenage nephew to take part in such violence. Apparently, his sister and other family members had also participated, and Kingi was devastated by this news.

It took well over six months before Kingi was able to reach out to Shantit gangs and restart the peace dialogues. Nevertheless, tensions between Shantit and the rest of Bondeni remained high in the run-up to the 2013 general elections. Similarly, tensions between Shantit and 4B also continued to erupt occasionally, and Mathare residents began to draw on geo-political references and started calling the young men in Shantit ‘Al Shabaab’ and Shantit ‘Mogadishu’ or ‘Kismaiyio’ after war torn locations in Somalia. However, the conflict between Shantit and Kambi differed from the conflicts with 4B in one significant way. The majority of the people involved in the fights between Shantit and Kambi, on both sides of the conflict, identified as Kikuyu and even shared political affiliations. This conflict was shaped by notions of us and them based on specific intersecting positions (such as gender, age, locality and class), which counter-posed poor young men (and also a few young women) from Shantit with slightly wealthier women (and also a few of their male relatives) from Kambi. This again shows that ethnicity did not always play a role in moments violence between groups.

Conclusion
The main argument in this chapter posits that to understand so-called political violence in Mathare it is important to understand why, when and how ethnic hate narratives resonated with the experiences of people in the everyday, instead of taking these
narratives as cause and effect. However, the term political violence, with its strong ethnic connotations in Kenyan political discourse, remains an easy to use, albeit rather inadequate, singular concept with which to explain violence. It reiterates two fallacies: that all violence in Mathare and other Nairobi ghettos was motivated by ethnic identifications, and that it was mostly instigated by and aimed at boosting certain political players. It has, however, proved to be far more insightful to look at how dominant notions of ethnicity were re-imagined locally in shifting boundary-making projects and intersected with other positions.

This chapter thus showed that political instigation only played a limited role in the 2007/8 post-election violence and other conflicts that were labelled as political violence. Indeed, Motion and his groups were armed by a miller who had political ties to the opposition party. Yet, their motivations for fighting people with Kikuyu and many other, including their own, ethnic backgrounds, emanated more from situational, personal and contextual factors than from national political grievances. Kingi’s neighbour, Petero and Motion both had very personal reasons to engage in violence and attack Kingi and Odhis. Omitting these in analyses of such violence risks reproducing hate narratives and concomitant binaries, instead of nuancing and contextualising them.

Moving beyond the lens of political violence, this chapter looked at when, why and how ethnicity played a role in shifting articulations of belonging and processes of othering, and how these were tied to the rise in violence over the past decade. This helped to bring into view the locally forged binary between natives and visitors. At the same time, this chapter revealed that ethnic and local identifications did not intersect neatly with this binary. Indeed, despite the fact that a majority was imagined as having a Kikuyu background, self-proclaimed natives had multiple ethnic origins. Moreover, young men like Boss and Kingi identified strongly with the ghetto pride position. This did not mean that they did not identify with their ethnic backgrounds, but it shows that looking at shifts in these positions was crucial to understanding not just the situationality of, but also the relationality between, such positions.

Furthermore, many natives took newcomers to be tribalists, and as such they too drew on notions of ethnicity in processes of othering, even if they downplayed their own ethnic identifications in relation to their ghetto pride position. The binary of natives versus visitors gained strength at the same time as ethnic identification moved to the foreground of political relations. In this vein, the rise of this binary has to be understood as a mode in which people like Kingi grasped their own sense of unease with the increased emphasis on exclusive notions of ethnicity and belonging. This chapter has shown that shifting notions of ethnicity played unexpected roles in different conflicts in Mathare, and at times such notions did not play any role at all. The contextualisation of these notions by looking at particular cases and basing my analyses on personal narratives was crucial for detecting such contingencies. This has enabled me to shed a different and more layered light on how violence emerged from processes of routine violence in Mathare, that is the drawing up of shifting notions of us and them (see also Pandey 2006; see Introduction). It also brought into view how such notions shaped, and were shaped by, exclusion mechanisms, and how
people experienced ensuing exclusion in the everyday. Accordingly, the notion of everyday violence adds to the concept of routine violence by highlighting experiences of poverty, exclusion and humiliation (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004:1; Bourgois 2010). Analysing how working gang members negotiated dominant discourses on ethnicity, and how this intersected with other positions in relation to immediate needs, helped me to approach the experiential level of violence and comprehend the performative power of hate narratives. This also enabled me to tease out how such notions changed meaning in different time and space-bound contexts and among different (groups of) people.
Conclusion

My ethnography has focused on the multiple meanings of gangs in the everyday practices of young men in Mathare, a Nairobi ghetto, and has analysed these meanings in relation to wider cultural, political, and economic frameworks and developments. In particular, it has looked at the daily struggles of young ghetto men who faced multiple marginalities (Vigil 2003) in their attempts to become senior men and how this was related to membership of a working gang. Accordingly, this book has aimed to move beyond the dominant representations of gangs in Kenya and elsewhere as criminal, political and mono-ethnic networks of idle young men. I thus hope to have contributed to debates on gangs in Kenya and worldwide, African masculinities, and articulations of ethnic and local belonging. By looking at what pushed young men to join or leave working gangs, how this was tied to struggles over positions of manhood, and why and how gangs and individual gang members took part in junctures of violence, this book goes beyond the stereotypical, but highly pervasive, depiction of these young men as thugs for hire. As a consequence, I found that along with the much-researched concept of political violence, which is heavily intertwined with ethnicity in the context of Kenya, other factors like work, gender and belonging turned out be crucial in gaining insight into the social processes of working gang formation in Mathare, and into the participation of these gangs and individual gang members in violence.

Respectable ‘Illegality’

In the Introduction, I formulated the main challenge for my research as understanding why and how young men in Mathare both join and leave working gangs. I launched the term working gang for groups that focused on alcohol production and the drug trade, because the members themselves referred to their income-generating activities as work. Referring to illegal practices in this way is not uncommon among groups that are engaged in them. The local conceptualisation of distilling alcohol as work fully captures the notion of “respectable illegality”. The young distillers were acutely aware of its illegal status, but they imagined it as reputable as it enabled them to perform (young) male duties and earn respect from community residents. Though illegal, their line of work was safer than stealing and backed the alcohol industry in Bondeni (Mathare). Indeed, most households in this area depended on businesses that were directly or indirectly connected to this industry. The notion of respectable illegality has thus been helpful in highlighting how the local framing of working gangs as more reputable than other type of gangs came about.

Their respectability in popular view to some extent explains why numerous young men chose working gangs above other gangs, but the underlying question as to why many young men in Mathare joined gangs in the first place requires attention to be paid to other factors. This research highlighted the dire circumstances in which people in Mathare live, revealing that the most obvious reason for young men in this ghetto to joining a working
gang seems to emanate from economic necessity. Nevertheless, such explanations risk reducing complex social motivations and decision-making processes to monetary logics (see also Bourdieu 1992). Economic necessity, for instance, does not explain why young men chose different types of gang, why certain young men did not choose to become gang members at all, or why all gang members were so adamant about eventually leaving their particular gang. I have tried to develop a broader view of the current and future social possibilities and constraints that young men imagined when making decisions and acting on them, especially pertaining to joining and leaving working gangs. These young men navigated present-day contexts with their eye on particular circumscribed social horizons (Vigh 2006). Kingi and all of the other young men who featured in this book were driven by a shared desire to improve their social status and actualise the position of senior manhood. This predominantly shaped their social navigation trajectories, within which both joining and leaving working gangs were considered to be key steps. Accordingly, I have shown that the social processes of working gang formation in Mathare were predominantly shaped by notions of work and dominant standards of masculinity, rather than by ethnicity or political affiliations. Ethnicity did play a role as a boundary marker in many other group-making projects that also involved working gang members from time to time, albeit in highly unexpected ways. Vigh’s concept of social navigation proved to be very helpful in positioning the volatile role of ethnicity in these young men’s struggles to retain focus in a situation of constant uncertainty. I will return below to the way in which I tried to enrich this concept by adding a focus on negotiation by reading life histories against the grain.

In contrast to the prevailing views on gangs operating in Kenya, working gangs in Mathare were multi-ethnic, organised in terms of specific income-generating activities (e.g. distilling alcohol, dealing drugs, managing bus stations, brokering stolen goods), and tied to small localities within particular ghetto villages. Especially striking was the role of working gangs in structuring the processes of becoming men in a community that was dominated by women. These processes were popularly imagined as following the gradual attainment of specific social, cultural and economic capital (see also Bourdieu 1986). One of the main pathways to gradually achieving such ambitions was by joining a working gang, as these gangs were popularly conceptualised as age-sets that helped young men to progress from junior to senior manhood. Most young men moved out of their family’s one-room house after circumcision at the age of 16 to begin life as a junior man. Working gangs allowed young men to cater for and garner adequate capital with which to eventually establish themselves as senior men. The working gang also enabled these young men to maintain meaningful relationships with their families by working for close female relatives and performing security and other forms of community service in their neighbourhood area. Interestingly, notions of work, respectability and community service are not generally associated with gangs in the dominant discourses, whether in Kenya or worldwide. I, however, focused on the everyday role of gangs in ghettos, and studying these groups from local viewpoints revealed the fluidity and overlap between gangs and between gangs and other social groups of young men such as football teams, youth groups and even CBOs. This view thus helped me to approach the experiential level of the social processes of working
gang formation, and to go beyond representations that prevail in both the media and academia. Accordingly, this perspective highlighted the quite different roles of gangs and gang members in the local setting.

The notion of respectable illegality has also been useful in unearthing another layer of people’s discourse on licit ways to earn an income in Mathare. As described throughout this book, the police and community residents engaged in rather fraught relationships. At times, their interactions proved to be profitable for both parties, but the majority of residents regarded the police as a powerful, yet illicit and extremely dangerous, authority. Police action, such as killing criminal suspects on sight, and police involvement in illegal activities, such as taking bribes from alcohol and drug bosses, made this form of authority highly perverse in the local view. This perversion rendered the dominant binary between legality and illegality hollow and meaningless, and this bolstered local value systems that deviated from state regulatory authorities and logics. Re-evaluating certain illegal practices as respectable also created a space for residents to implicitly condemn police brutality. For instance, local residents often took pride in following strict moral codes while countering themselves to the corrupt police. In doing so, these residents negotiated the dominant discourse on morality and, in the process, reimagined such codes to fit their own experiences. Interestingly, this goes against mainstream views of ghetto residents that hold them as embodiments of moral decay and barbarism. Chapter 6 also showed how, at times, such derogatory dominant notions served to other self-proclaimed natives by newcomers in Mathare, and I will come back to this below.

This study aimed to contribute to scholarly debates on gangs by following Wacquant (2002; 2011), Vigil (2003), Hagedorn (2007) and others who plead for more ethnographic research in gang studies. However, as described in the Introduction, this field continues to be dominated by a focus on gangs in North and South America, and even if a more global view is developed, Africa is still largely ignored (e.g. Hagedorn 2007). I have added to this work by focusing on gangs in East Africa, which is a region that is notably underexplored in gang studies. This helped to nuance the prevailing perception that considers all gangs in sub-Saharan Africa through the lens of religious and political rebellion, casting these groups as somehow different from gangs in other regions of the world. This book has shown that working gangs in Mathare share many commonalities with gangs worldwide in that they can be regarded as groups that organise access to (illegal/semi-illegal) work and other socio-economic opportunities for young, poor and urban men (in this case) who live in dire contexts that are marked by very few legal work prospects (see also Bourgois 1995). As a consequence, it is imperative to include gangs in sub-Saharan African ghettos in the emerging global agenda of comparative gang studies.

The gangs in this research were, however, also unique in two unforeseen (at least by me), yet crucial, ways. It is also along these dimensions that my study of Nairobi’s gangs can contribute to wider debates on such groups. Firstly, these Nairobi gangs operated in a matrifocal society and were largely controlled by women, thus bringing gender to the fore

---

1 Save for perhaps South Africa and Nigeria (e.g. Kynoch 2005; Harnischfeger 2003).
when it comes to analysing these groups. Secondly, these gangs were part of the social relationships that structured the processes of becoming senior men according to popular notions, as noted above. Consequently, leaving the gang was as much part of becoming a gang member as joining one, and both were locally taken as significant processes in actualising the position of senior manhood. Gender as such is not a new trope in gang studies (see also Bourgois 1996). Nevertheless, the roles of women as bosses and ‘cheerleaders’ of gangs of young men, and how this has a bearing on the latter’s imaginings of gendered senses of the self, which is so central in this study, give new dimensions to the role of gender in this field. Moreover, the modes in which gangs play a role in and structure situational and relational processes of becoming men requires further academic exploration. These emphases are all the more urgent in a global context that is currently witnessing rapid urbanisation (particularly in southern countries), an increasingly younger population, and a growing number of households led by single mothers (COHRE 2008). The declining access to opportunities for young men within the formal realm in the global south calls for in-depth analyses of how the self-organisation among young men within informal economies can often become quite productive in terms of economic growth, social cohesion and community development, to the extent that it may even benefit the so-called formal economy (see also Sullivan 2012; Schneider et al. 2010). Having said this, I have also illustrated that clear distinctions between formal and informal and legal and illegal are in fact hard to make (see also Roitman 2006).

The blurred boundaries between legality and illegality in this research may also point gang research, particularly in Kenya, in new directions. As well as suggestions to analyse gangs from local viewpoints and through notions of work and gender, and instead of just looking at political affiliations and ethnic identifications, this book has also highlighted the role of gangs in community development and service delivery. This is illustrated by their volunteer work in sport, garbage collection and security provision. The latter of these in particular needs more exploration. Kenya is known for its high crime rates and a volatile political climate. The country’s security crisis is painfully exposed by recent attacks (allegedly by militants from Al Shabaab), other junctures of violence between groups, and the disorganised, controversial and corrupt official response to these events. The process of Security Sector Reform (SSR) that commenced in 2003, and which became ever more urgent after the 2007/8 post-election violence, has still not translated into tangible results on the ground, as the unlawful killings of young and poor men continue to persist (MUHURI & OSI 2013). This book showed that working gangs – and not only ethnic-based gangs – in Nairobi’s ghettos provided security to their communities in the absence of a functioning police force, and can thus also be regarded as non-state security actors, which are often locally dubbed as vigilante groups (Anderson 2002). At times, these groups even protected local residents from state security actors (such as police). Their relative legitimacy in these ghetto communities (as compared to the police) calls for further research on the relationships between different actors in plural security provision.

---

2This may apply, for instance, to the way chang’aa profits enable people to buy goods and services in the formal economy.
(including private actors, Diphoorn 2013) in Kenya from the perspectives of gang members and other ghetto residents. This is especially urgent in relation to community policing policies, called *Nyumba Kumi* ('Ten Houses' in Kiswahili), which are currently being implemented by the Kenyan government (see also Gitonga 2014).

**Anxious men**

Despite the fact that gangs offered work opportunities to young ghetto men, they were expected to leave the working gang and establish themselves as senior men around the age of 30 at the latest. However, leaving a gang has become increasingly difficult in recent times. This book brought out how this had an impact on the already tense gender relations in Mathare, and how young men navigated these shifts. I described how, during their gang membership, these young men became fathers, got married (not necessarily in that order) and gradually took up other positions that were widely associated with senior manhood. Nevertheless, gang members were never fully considered to be senior men in the popular discourse as long as they continued to be part of the gang. The founding of the first alcohol gangs in Mathare in 1994, and later the drug gangs in the early 2000s, helped young men to carve out pathways for themselves to garner social and other types of capital that would help them to leave the gang. However, the economic slump after 2008 increasingly hindered their trajectories out of the gang, thus trapping gang members in a more permanent state of 'lesser manhood' (see below). Accordingly, anxieties about manhood among both men and women put mounting pressure on gender relations in Mathare, and relationships between women and young men in particular became more and more unhinged.

One of the leading concepts in studies of African youth and masculinities when it comes to capturing a state of social confinement among young people in Africa is 'waithood', which was first coined by Singerman (2007) and further developed by Honwana (2012). This term denotes 'waiting for adulthood', and implies a liminal space in which young people are neither dependent children nor autonomous adults. However, this notion seems to be inadequate in terms of describing the situation of young, male gang members in Mathare, notwithstanding some clear parallels. It might be more important to point out where this concept has shortcomings for my study, and probably also for the study of African youths in other settings. It is precisely through the more problematic aspects that the concept can open up new directions in theorising differences between experiences of marginalised young people in African countries. Although Honwana stresses that waithood is not about passivity, the term cannot properly shake off this suggestion. Using such a notion would thus risk reproducing dominant views that young ghetto men are idle and passive. Another problem is the way the concept is tied to gender. Honwana again acknowledges that both genders experience waithood in dissimilar ways. She also states that women are considered to be adults sooner than men, for instance through childbirth, yet they are still dependent on men achieving adulthood in the long run. This collides with the obvious fact that many women in Mathare, but also in other Nairobi ghettos and areas in Kenya, are relatively independent from men, both in terms of finances
and social status (see also Silberschmidt 2001, 2004). Furthermore, this term suggests that deep insecurity about the future, waiting for better opportunities, feeling stuck – despite a relentless effort – and the inability to build meaningful lives all seem to be unique to young people (Honwana 2012).

This brings me to this concept’s biggest flaw when it comes to this research, namely the suggestion that waithood concerns an interstitial phase between childhood and adulthood. I have shown in this book that junior manhood (16-30) is a social phase on its own in Mathare, and is not just a liminal space between two social categories. Junior men in this ghetto were adult men who were husbands and fathers, and who performed other (junior) male duties within the family and community set-up. Furthermore, junior manhood was a phase of opportunities, relative freedom (it allowed young men *kuraha* – ‘to have fun’ in Sheng) and creativity (*ujanjess*), however entwined this all was with a desire to step out of the gang and achieve senior manhood. The notion of waithood cannot, for instance, quite capture Malik’s position, as explored in Chapter 4. Malik desperately wanted to become a father and husband again after divorcing his wife and thus regain some of the social capital he had lost, which was capital that would have helped him to achieve senior manhood in the long run. At the same time, he navigated his predicaments by boosting his social status as a junior man, fellow *baze* member, political contact, businessman, football player and project leader. All of these positions helped him to enact notions of junior manhood and gain respect within the community. Indeed, he was still young enough (26 years-old) to be fully recognised as such, despite his anxieties about his divorce.

Problems emerged when young men could not make the transition to senior manhood as they grew older. Nonetheless, these men continued to be husbands and fathers, friends and football players, and perhaps even youth group leaders and community volunteers. However, they were frustrated, scared, even insecure, and could not perform certain duties within their families and communities as a result of their status as lesser men (Connell 2002, 1995; Willemse 2009: 226). These men were in danger of – increasingly – being taken as weak and foolish (*fala*). They could not negotiate the bride price for their daughters (or other female family members), and nor could they take up other roles associated with senior manhood. Nonetheless, *mafala* were still considered to be adults and, to some extent, valuable members of the community. Vigh uses the term ‘social moratorium’ (2006: 89-116) to indicate the shrinking space that young men had in Guinea Bissau to set their lives along culturally circumscribed pathways. However, this notion does not fully describe the situation of young ghetto men in Mathare, because it does not bring into view their particularly troubled relationships with women. Indeed, these young men were engaged in conflict over power with women of all ages, even more than was the case with older men, whereas the notion of social moratorium is often used to highlight generational tensions within (crumbling) patrimonial structures.

A major thread running through this book was how these young men’s fears of growing redundancy with regard to women shaped their social navigation struggles. These men may best be described by the term ‘anxious men’, referring to those who feared
becoming lesser men. As such, this concept has close connections to the idea of social death (Patterson 1982; Vigh 2006: 33). The notion of lesser men captures the social position of mafala very well, whereas the concept of anxious men denotes the state of their growing fear of being taken as lesser men, and as mafala, by their communities. It was this fear that shaped most decision-making and positioning among the young men focused on in this book. Young men who approached their mid-twenties without achieving certain milestones such as fatherhood and marriage felt increasingly disconnected and out of place. This is illustrated by their frequent use of the word ‘island’ to describe their fear of detachment from their communities. Their anxieties about becoming trapped in the gang space and being considered mafala while approaching the appropriate age of senior manhood were becoming ever more intense. In the previous chapters, I described the multiple hindrances young men encountered in trying to leave the gang in recent years, as compared to the position in the 1990s and early 2000s. Their anxieties do not, however, indicate that young men were locally considered to be redundant or disconnected; instead, it denoted the qualms that young men had about losing more and more social, political and economic ground in relation to their community and society at large, but especially with regard to the women in their lives.

In this research, I explored how and why, from the perspectives of young men, the recent economic decline affected the two genders differently in Mathare. Following consecutive rises in food prices and ensuing drops in chang’aa profits over the past five years, it became increasingly hard for young men to establish meaningful lives outside the gang. The historically stronger position of women in Mathare was reinforced by NGO interventions at the same time as rising food prices caused chang’aa profits to drop (2007-now). Through NGO connections, women were able to diversify their sources of income, whereas men were deeply affected by the drop in chang’aa profits. Moreover, surging unemployment rates heavily impinged on industries such as construction (one of the few options outside Mathare for men), but less on domestic jobs (one of the few opportunities outside Mathare for women). Inside Mathare, political pathways to power were blocked by the few older men in this ghetto (such as the councils of village elders), leaving only certain avenues – such as gangs, micro-businesses and community development – open when it came to building social status and achieving economic independence. Most young men thus felt increasingly left out. Furthermore, their anxieties were profoundly aggravated by the unlawful killings of young ghetto men by the police that have become a systematic phenomenon since 2002.

I discussed in detail, and from different perspectives, how the double bind of depending on women for work and being expected to provide for women led to mounting anxieties among young ghetto men. Chapters 4 and 5 analysed the different social navigation strategies used to counter such anxieties and enact masculine ideals, which varied from persuasion to the use of force. Malik’s narratives in Chapter 4 reveal just how much some young men were willing to invest (both in terms of money and time) to counter their anxieties, reverse assumed redundancy and enact the position of the provider against all odds (cf. Silberschmidt 2004:45-47; Hunter 2006:102; Miescher and Lindsay 2003:20).
Looking at young men’s anxieties about becoming superfluous was also useful in exploring why and how tensions within the intimacy of marriage played out between groups of women and young men in the public sphere of Mathare. Friction between gang members and their predominantly female bosses has even culminated in full-blown physical clashes with casualties and the destruction of property on both sides. This research revealed that some young men felt that persuasion did not always help them to attain higher social positions as men, and they at times charted other and often more violent strategies. Engaging in direct acts of violence was, to a large extent, aimed at forcing a shift in the, in their eyes, oppressive and anomalous gender relations. Dominant media representations often depicted these men as detached, idle, frustrated and prone to violence, and therefore a threat. Contrary to such perceptions, engaging in violent strategies was more often than not aimed at reinforcing their sense of belonging to their family and community. Regarding their participation in such violence as strategic, and as part of their social navigation struggles, enabled a view that held these men as agents instead of mere victims of power configurations.

‘Focus’ was a term often evoked by these men to explain their own successes and failures and appraise their peers (see also Chapter 3). Having a strong ambition, described by them in terms of fatherhood, signified to these men the opposite of giving up, and, as such, denoted life, whereas ‘giving up’ implied death. This significantly adds to the concept of social horizon, as it highlights how culturally-circumscribed aspirations were negotiated by young men and had an impact on their view of current shifts and future opportunities. This was especially striking among men who held onto this ambition seemingly against all odds. Most men in this research alternated between two apparently oppositional positions of manhood, namely having focus (mjanja) and giving up (jala), while making decisions during moments of radical uncertainty (Johnson-Hanks 2005; Vigh 2008). Many concepts developed to capture social navigation in contexts of enduring crises (such as “judicious opportunism”, Johnson-Hanks 2005) put the emphasis on the way agents recognise unfolding social possibilities and constraints, and seize opportunities in the moment. I have shown that these young men did appear to make impromptu decisions addressing immediate concerns, but, strikingly, they never lost sight of the ambitions to which they oriented their actions. On the contrary, they constantly contemplated how acting in the now related to ever-shifting future possibilities and constraints and would affect their goals. As a consequence, young men’s reflections on their actions and how this pertained to their aspirations – and to shifting possibilities and limitations in the now and in the future – should be part of analysing their social navigation in the moment. If not, research may be in danger of reproducing the stereotype of the young African man ‘living in the now.’

This study aimed to contribute to research on African masculinities by demonstrating both the power of dominant masculine ideals and the fluid and context bound negotiations of such norms by young men in the everyday. As such, I was also able to bring into view their enactments of both dominant and alternative subjectivities (such as ghetto pride), thus permitting a more textured understanding of how seemingly conflicting positions of manhood were imagined by young men in shifting temporal and spatial
contexts. Accordingly, focusing on young men’s anxieties was helpful in analysing processes of becoming men from an experiential level, especially pertaining to ageing. This may also shed new light on how to study popular imaginings of the political and social category of youth in Kenya (and elsewhere). The only times young men in my research referred to themselves as youths was when they discussed politics, criticised the ruling (predominantly older) elite, and argued for the right of youths to access power (see also Chapter 2). Interestingly, their discussion of politics also included NGOs and CSOs, notably in terms of how these organisations recognised and mobilised young people in civic education and business programmes (for instance, the ‘Yes Youth Can!’ campaign by USAID). Nevertheless, the term youth and the concomitant discourses carried little significance in their everyday relationships with their families, the community and each other. From circumcision onwards, these young men referred to themselves as men, and in general reflected upon their decisions and other actions by drawing on popular discourses on manhood. Consequently, more research is needed to understand the way these discourses speak to each other and are negotiated by young men in the everyday, both in Kenya and elsewhere.

Lastly, all of the young men in this book not only had to negotiate being cast as ghetto boys (even after achieving a position of senior manhood, like Kingi) and non-citizens in the dominant discourse, but they also risked being killed as such. As noted, their wives, mothers and communities hardly considered these men to be superfluous or disconnected – on the contrary. Yet, the fear narratives instigated by the state and media representations fell onto fertile ground among the wider public, as exemplified by the complete lack of a public outcry over the systematic killing of these men. Accordingly, young ghetto men marked the symbolic boundaries of Kenyan citizenship. Not only was the ghetto an othered space, and as such a bordered space, as described in the Introduction, but young ghetto men in particular were also othered. As a consequence, their position within the context of the nation state can be regarded as a bordered position (see also Van Houtum & Van Naerssen 2002; Popescu 2012). The notion of a bordered position may thus be helpful when it comes to underscoring the confluence between spatial and social marginalisation processes, and the ensuing restrictions and oppressions that these young men in particular experience in the everyday. These young men were cast as criminals who threaten the nation state, and killing them marked out who belonged to the Kenyan nation and who did not (see also Appadurai 1999) in the most physical and brutal sense of the word. In response, most young men imagined a sense of belonging to the ghetto, which they typified in terms of motherhood and school, as Malik put it (in Chapter 4), and not to the nation state. This was, in fact, part of the alternative subject position of ghetto pride, notwithstanding a continued longing shared by many young ghetto men to also belong to the Kenyan nation state. This was worded by Malik (in Chapter 4) as follows: "One day I will drive a car!" This position of non-citizenship tied in with local discourses on morality in which national discourses functioned as points of reference. Nevertheless, these dominant moral codes were transformed to meet local experiences, as also noted above. Taken in the dominant discourse as criminals who threaten the nation and deserve to be
killed, these young men flipped the meaning of the border position of young ghetto men to claim the moral upper hand. Instead of perpetrators, they took themselves and fellow ghetto residents to be victims of abusive authorities, and they took great pride in protecting their community against such a predatory state. Gangs were one of the few social spaces where these young men were able to enact ghetto pride without too much interference by the state and other authorities (such as women’s groups or a council of elders that collaborated with the state). I thus hope to have paved the way for more research on notions of (non-)citizenship and belonging in Kenya, and how these pertain to subdominant discourses on morality and to positions of manhood and class.

The jealous neighbour
As noted in the Introduction, my focus on working gangs became crucial for acquiring better insight into the rise and demise of ethnic-based gangs and into understanding mounting violence in Mathare from the early 2000s onwards. Nearly all direct acts of violence emanated from routine violence that structurally marginalised different social groups in Mathare. Dominant ethnic hate narratives at times gained performative power (Marshal-Fratani 2006) among these different groups in attempts to comprehend disparities between them. This book certainly revealed that some working gang members shifted gang alliances during conflict, hence boosting ethnic-based gangs during critical moments. At other times, however, working gangs teamed up with local residents to oust ethnic-based gangs. Working gangs and individual members thus participated in conflicts that involved ethnic-based gangs in unexpected ways, and this brings important nuances to the dominant narrative in Kenya that explains the mounting violence in Mathare solely in ethnic terms. The rise and fall of ethnic-based gangs, group rivalry between those gangs and political instigation have all contributed to the growing conflict (see also Anderson 2002). Nevertheless, chapters 5 and 6 also show how working gangs were involved in many different junctures of violence and for a wide range of reasons. Looking in this book at their experiences, reflections and justifications of violence helped to better explain how working gangs and individual members were tied to mounting clashes in Mathare. This has brought out a multi-layered understanding of surging conflicts in this ghetto, revealing the shifts between different identifications and processes of othering at play during moments of violence. Furthermore, such an in-depth view has offered new insights into why young men joined and left working gangs during and after moments of violence, making these analyses key to answering the main question of this research project.

As described in Chapter 6, political violence has strong ethnic underpinnings in the Kenyan dominant discourse, and has been the prevailing prism through which growing tensions in Nairobi’s ghettos have been analysed, both in the media and academia. This has been useful when it comes to gaining insight into political instigations of violence by political parties and local authorities in specific localities. However, this book has shown that in order to fully understand why and how episodes of violence emerge in this ghetto, and perhaps elsewhere, it is crucial to examine the historical, social, economic and political factors that come together in a particular locality at a particular moment in time. It is also
vital to investigate these elements from the perspectives of the people (such as working gang members) involved in such violence, whether as perpetrators, victims, or both. To understand this violence from the viewpoint of its participants, the context-bound histories of ethnic labels and how these intersected with popular notions of belonging and entitlement were crucial. Discourses about ethnic labels thus imagined were politically strategic constructs; the people who were supposed to belong to these constructs and reap the consequences, whether they wanted to or not, such as the poor with Kikuyu and Luo backgrounds, hardly ever fitted them. In their narratives, the young men increasingly imagined violence in terms of ‘us Kikuyu’ and ‘them Luo’ and vice versa. I argued that these ethnic labels hide more than they reveal and cannot be used as an explanatory concept on their own. The young men who killed and died in the name of an ethnic label turned out to actually know very little about the dominant history of those constructs, or about past social relationships between the particular ethnic groups to which they refer. I demonstrated, for instance, that the construction of rival groups on ethnic grounds was related to the specific histories of migration in Mathare. The 'Kikuyu-Luo' antagonism that came to dominate national discourses of citizenship and political narratives in Kenya thus gained performative power on the ground because of highly local developments.

Prevailing stereotypes cast young men as perpetrators of violence. However, I have demonstrated that junctures of violence involved members of almost all social groups in Mathare, and not just young men. Additionally, conflicts that had very little to do with electoral politics, but which occurred around election time, have been swept on the same pile as the notion of politically instigated violence. Likewise, politically instigated conflicts that took place at other times have largely been overlooked in such representations. What is more, a lot of the violence was political, but these conflicts often had very little to do with elections, even if such episodes occurred around election time. The first motives that remain out of sight when conflicts in these ghettos are merely analysed through the lens of political violence and ethnicity have already been discussed above. Groups of young men from time to time engaged in violent clashes with groups of women in order to assert manhood, reverse power relationships and reinforce their sense of belonging to the community as men. Besides political instigation, it was again crucial to bring in gender – intersecting with local notions of class, locality and age – in order to understand the violence in Mathare and why some young men took part in it.

Interestingly, the trope of the jealous neighbour was often evoked by working gang members (and residents in general) to explain all kinds of conflict in Mathare. This notion proved to be useful in this research for unravelling how, when and why conflicts emerged, because it added an often overlooked dimension of violence in Mathare, albeit one that is well understood by local residents. The dimensions described by this image included both the power of jealousy (emanating from feeling excluded) and the opportunity that violence may provide to improve one's own position. The notion of the jealous neighbour has helped in unpacking different layers of the reasons behind participation in, and the meanings of, violence in Mathare from the perspective of young ghetto men. Illustrated by Kingi’s ordeal, the jealous neighbour was not just an abstract notion that people imagined.
to explain witchcraft spells (*juju* in Sheng), conflicts and other ill fates, but could be a very real person. This book revealed that the term neighbour was a rather fluid concept referring to many different types of relationship, including family relations, friendships and business rivals. Without a clear core, this notion served to explain many different relationships and conflicts (see also Willemse 2009). In the process of negotiation, its content was thus, to a large extent, established in relation to what it was not. For instance, in Kingi’s cases, its content was determined by the fact that both the neighbour and Motion were not considered to be natives in Mathare, whereas in Odhis’s case the meaning of this notion was transformed to pinpoint that Motion was not regarded as trustworthy as a fellow gang member. However, this does not mean that anything goes; all of the relationships described by this trope had in common the fact that they were bounded by a deep level of intimacy and proximity, both in space and time.

Peter Geschiere (2013) has beautifully captured the link between intimacy and uncertainty, and how this pertains to jealousy, trust and situational notions of witchcraft. I have not particularly focused on witchcraft in this book, yet the way Geschiere has analysed the dangers involved in intimate relationships, and how this could even lead to direct acts of violence, helped me to grasp an important aspect of neighbourhood relationships in Mathare. People in Mathare engaged in relationships that were imbued with danger, yet they were also based on trust and interdependency. The ways both potential dangers and encounters of trust constituted intimacy in Mathare were never self-evident, but highly situational and relational. Accordingly, approaching such seemingly conflicting and potentially conflictive relationships called for an in-depth contextualisation of such relationships and their shifts. Through such analyses, and by following the logic of young working gang members, I have been able to bring into view their ostensibly contradictory and highly fluid positions during conflicts. I thus discovered another layer to the binary between popular positions of manhood, *mjanja* and *fala*. These positions intersected with notions of natives and visitors in unexpected ways, and this again helped me to bring nuance to the dominant trope of ethnicity.

The rather recent notions of natives and visitors emerged during the rise of Mungiki gangs and the influx of a lot of young men from Western Kenya in the early 2000s (from which local Taliban groups later emerged). Both of these groups were powerful and large, and they increasingly foregrounded ethnicity in socio-economic and political relationships (especially in relation to each other). This prompted the emergence of the notion of visitors among self-proclaimed natives. Chapter 6 described how young men who took themselves as natives blamed these visitors for ‘bringing ethnicity to the ghetto.’ It also considered how many alleged visitors with Luo backgrounds imagined natives as ‘real ghetto residents’ with Kikuyu backgrounds, or as people who were inculcated by a putative Kikuyuness, by which they essentially meant criminality. This chapter revealed that notions of visitors and natives did not intersect neatly with putative ethnic and local identifications (or with actually being raised in Mathare or not). In popular use, the notions of what separated a native from a visitor shifted per temporal and spatial context. Motion, for instance, was taken as a native in 4B and a visitor in Bondeni, and though the notion of
natives seemed to be conflated with the *mjanja* position of manhood, Motion was also widely taken as street-smart. Moreover, Odhis was considered to be a visitor by most, but a native through his wife by Motion. Accordingly, ethnicity does not fully capture such shifts, and nor do class, age, locality and gender. Such identifications often intersected both with each other and with notions of visitors and natives in unforeseen ways in attempts to claim belonging and legitimise violence. This binary helped me to understand, for instance, how Odhis could have been considered a Kikuyu by Motion, and how Petro could foreground his Luo background at one time and his Kikuyu origins at another. This all shows that the way young men negotiated dominant discourses and imagined intersecting and shifting notions of us and them, 4B versus Bondeni, distillers versus bosses, Kikuyu versus Luo, young men versus women, *wasee* versus *wazee*, *wajanja* versus *mafala*, ghetto versus ghetto punk, natives versus visitors, and neighbour versus neighbour, cannot be generalised in any way; they have to be contextualised in terms of space and time to understand both the ambiguity of the notions of us and them at play and their context-bound meanings and material effects.

The common thread that runs through all of the violent conflicts that have occurred over the past decade in Mathare is a growing sense of exclusion among many different social groups. Working gang members felt excluded by (predominantly) female gang bosses and other women, and drew on intersecting gender, class and age identifications and, at times, ethnic hate narratives to claim belonging and entitlement. Newcomers, meanwhile, felt excluded by self-proclaimed natives who were considered to be in control of local resources and pathways to power, and they drew on ethnic hate narratives and dominant discourses on morality to explain wealth disparities and scold 'real ghetto residents.' Self-proclaimed natives felt excluded by visitors who othered them in ethnic and moral terms, and conjured up a strong sense of belonging to the ghetto in return. Interestingly, natives also drew on ethnic hate narratives in othering visitors. The list is long, illustrated by the summing-up of different notions of us and them in the above, and working gang members identified with – and were cast as – belonging to many different groups (e.g. visitor, alcohol distiller, junior men, provider). This caused some working gang members to feel doubly excluded. All of these different notions of us and them traversed each other in particular ways during specific moments of violence. These kaleidoscopic intersections thus helped to explore why social and political relations in Mathare were marked by a growing sense of exclusion, and why some gang members felt more excluded than others. This also helped to tease out differences in choice-making among men who were similarly positioned within particular power configurations.

The jealous neighbour proved to be a powerful trope, because of its shaky underpinnings. It epitomised the 'excluded', namely the one who is looking from the outside in, the one who is barred by powerful others and feels entitled to desire and even claim what these others have. Of course, the jealous neighbour was always them, and never us. Accordingly, self-proclaimed natives deployed this trope to, for instance, legitimise their own relatively stronger socio-economic positions and undermine claims of belonging and entitlement by visitors. Looking at different uses of these oppositional
notions brought the histories of neighbour(hood) relations to the fore of my analyses, and in particular the migration history of the first generation of predominantly women with Kikuyu backgrounds during and after the colonial era described in Chapter 1. The local uses of the terms natives and visitors bring to mind the academic debate on autochtony and allochtony (Geschiere 2009) and the way this has been taken up by scholars on Kenya (cf. Lonsdale 2008b). The theoretical framework on autochtony holds that at times of adversity the need to define the other and demarcate authentic native selves by unmasking ‘traitors from inside’ becomes most poignant (Geschiere 2009:13). Repeatedly, smaller and shifting circles are drawn in attempts to define the self and the other and to fix what is in flux (Geschiere 2009:31). Discourses of belonging are constantly contested and new modes of othering are brought into being to re-affirm their self-evidence. Lonsdale describes how emic terms such as ‘natives’, ‘first-comers’ or ‘indigenous people’ relate to notions of belonging and entitlement ‘to the soil’ in Kenya (Lonsdale 2008b:306; Kagwanja & Southall 2009:269), and this corresponds with notions of autochtony explored in other regions in Africa (see also Geschiere 2009; Marshall-Fratani 2006).

Entitlement to the soil does, however, have different meanings in a ghetto where most residents, including the first generation of women, enact a sense of displacement, or at least a state of ‘being in transition.’ Nevertheless, groups in Mathare have always struggled over entitlement to resources by drawing on a myriad of legitimating discourses, illustrated in Chapter 5 by the way working gang members imagined themselves as the embodiment of a putative ghettoness. Strikingly, this putative ghettoness was primarily imagined on the basis of intersecting gender, locality and class positions, and not in terms of notions of ethnic belonging. This demonstrates that recurrently smaller and shifting circles of us against them were conjured up to define selves from others and claim belonging and entitlement. Among the different discourses at play in Mathare when it comes to imagining notions of us and them, the binary between natives and visitors was indeed often a powerful trope. Yet, these ideas were not only imagined to exclude others and claim entitlement to resources, but also came up in response to being excluded, as mentioned above. I thus hope to have contributed to academic debates on ethnic and local belonging and entitlement, and to discussions on ‘nativism’ (see also Foner et al. 2014), by showing how the more recent notions of natives and visitors also emerged in Mathare in response to being othered by ‘newly arrived’ neighbours. This book’s insights into articulations of local belonging, and the enactments of alternative subject positions such as ghetto pride, may also provide new ways of understanding how articulations of local, national and ethnic belonging, and popular notions of manhood, pertain to class positions in other ghettos and other marginalised areas in Kenya and worldwide.

Looking for scopes of resistance
The theoretical framework of social navigation (Vigh 2006, 2009) enabled me to bring out how young men, despite situations of extreme insecurity, continued to build their lives against all odds. The metaphor used by Vigh to describe social navigation, namely as the ship that sails through dark and unpredictable waters towards still invisible, and thus
imagined, and shifting social horizon (Vigh 2006), fits the deep uncertainty of daily life for young ghetto men in Kenya. Moved by high waters, rough winds and dangerous storms, these young men navigated social relationships in the moment, with the main aim being to improve their social status as men and ultimately achieve senior manhood, which was their main culturally circumscribed ambition. As such, this framework helped to bring into view how dominant discourses had an impact on these men, and the way emerging opportunities and constraints shaped their possible orientations into the future. This approach did, however, fall short when it came to elucidating how their considerations of the immediate and the imagined pertained to differences in choice-making among similarly positioned men, and how this all had a bearing on individual social navigation struggles.

I have tried to overcome the limits posed by this framework by analysing the young men’s life histories against the grain. Looking at processes of subjectivation from the perspectives of the young men led me to focus on their ‘negotiation’ of discourses. The different ways in which these young men negotiated restrictive subject positions shaped different social navigation trajectories among them. This focus has also helped to highlight the availability of particular alternative positions such as ghetto pride. Accordingly, the concept of negotiation has added to social navigation theory in crucial ways. It allowed me to analyse how individual young men positioned themselves within the context of the highly restrictive forces that moved all of them. Looking at their processes of negotiation enabled me to approach the different modalities in which young ghetto men navigated social relationships and highly unstable circumstances. Facing divorce from his wife, Malik, for instance, shifted his focus from home to enacting ghetto pride through swag, which is a mode of positioning that included the othering of mapunk as mafala (see Chapter 4). Through this, he aimed to counteract his deteriorating social position as a junior man in the now, without losing sight of his ambition to eventually achieve senior manhood. Carving out this particular pathway did, however, also hinder Malik in terms of leaving the gang space, because it involved a major investment of resources. Yet, the analysis showed that he did not dare risk ‘losing his value’ as a junior man, and he continued on this path. Kingi and Blue made markedly different choices, despite the subject positions and ambitions they shared with Malik. They enacted ghetto pride not through swag modes of dressing, but by taking on leadership roles within the gang and baze, their families, and their wider social and political networks. In doing so, they both othered young men who were still part of the gang at the age of 30 – and especially those who were addicted to alcohol and drugs – as mafala. Looking at the way these young men negotiated dominant discourses, and positioned themselves and others, thus helped me to comprehend differences in choice-making among similarly positioned men.

Analysing the process of negotiation through the narratives of young ghetto men made their social navigation struggles detectable to me from their own points of view. This type of discourse analysis was useful in grasping intersubjective patterns of individual experiences, and as such of situated and embodied histories and agencies. These patterns were not generalisable in absolute terms, but they did shed light on dominant and available alternative discursive frameworks and their mediated effects within particular spatial,
temporal and social contexts. This enabled me to approach how some of these men were, at times, able to claim power and resist oppressive structures, however fleetingly, by constructing the position of ghetto pride. It also allowed me to contextualise ethnicity by analysing contingent notions of us and them based on shifting articulations of local and ethnic belonging from their perspectives.

The focus on choice-making in this book may have brought to mind a rational actor, an agent with full view of the power configurations in which he was positioned. Yet, most agents are not autonomous and rational actors, but make decisions without full awareness, out of impulse and routine, based on desires, and by following the examples of others. This book described how young ghetto men constantly redrew trajectories into the future in relation to current change. These were not intentional, single or linear routes, obvious in direction and with clearly defined destinations. On the contrary, these were often unfolding, multiple, ambiguous and diverging imaginings without fixed outcomes. Young men’s movements in and evaluations of the immediate were to a large extent informed by their anxieties, anticipations and aspirations with regard to actualising the position of senior manhood. These affects and desires were constantly contemplated, adapted and reconstructed, and with them so were the pathways to realising them. Intentionality denotes actively motivated actions, and includes "all the ways in which action is cognitively and emotionally pointed towards some purpose" (Ortner 2006: 134, emphasis in original). Despite their ambitions, which were infused with the hope of becoming a father and a senior man, their intentions in terms of their day-to-day actions were not always obvious to the young men themselves. Furthermore, most of the social outcomes of their actions were probably unintended, moved as they were by powerful and shifting social formations. It was, however, very difficult to detect if actions and outcomes by my research participants were intended or unintended (or partly both), and how explicit this was to them, as illustrated by Motion’s shift in gang alliance and his later reflections (see Chapter 6). Hard divisions between one and the other can thus only serve as opposite ends of a theoretical spectrum that allows careful consideration of different shades in between.

Their reflections on decisions did reveal that the young men in this study had a strong sense of purpose and direction. They were quite aware (rada in Sheng) of possibilities and constraints in the now and in the future, and how this related to their increasingly unattainable ambitions. They also often feared meeting an early death and lacking the scope to make change happen in their lives. Most of these men thus alternated between 'having focus' (mjanja) and 'feeling powerless' (fala), and this book brought out that the way these men downplayed, foregrounded and integrated these seemingly conflicting positions of manhood in different contexts highlighted differences between their decision-making and, accordingly, between individual social navigation struggles.

In this book, a concept of agency came to the fore that encompassed the situational relationality between structure and actor, and which included acts of both compliance and resistance (Davids and Willemse 2014). The different modes in which young ghetto men

---

3 See also Butler (1993) and Derrida (1982) for discussions on the notion of 'iterability'.

232
negotiated dominant discourses, at times upholding while at other times challenging dominant notions and subject positions, revealed that affirming dominant subject positions could also indicate instances of agency. This begs the question as to under which conditions the upholding of a dominant subject position may allude to agency (see also Mahmood 2005). Kingi and many other young men in this book were highly invested in adhering to the position of the provider, and even during times of great adversity they took immense pride in at least trying to live up to this masculine ideal. As a consequence, it was not just in succeeding, but also in trying, that agency manifested itself. Interestingly, this type of struggling and hustling (dubbed by them kung’ang’ana – Kiswahili for ‘to struggle’ – or kuhustle in Sheng) perhaps affirmed one subject position, but also helped to, at times, resist another. Enacting the role of provider, even against all odds, was also part of enacting ghetto pride and resisting the ghetto boy position, as it underscored their identification as men instead of boys.

The method of analysing biographic narratives against the grain has guided me in analysing the narratives of these young men, and in terms of understanding how “discourse confine[s] and restrict[s] narrators, but also make[s] their actions and choices possible, rendering agency crucial in facilitating their ‘being in the world’” (Davids and Willemse 2014:3). It also helped me to listen to silence or to hear (and observe) implicit messages in their words (and – bodily – practices), and understand why my research participants said things (or acted) in certain ways in relation to particular temporal and spatial contexts. The way they argued and how they, often ambiguously, positioned themselves with respect to dominant discourses was rarely clearly articulated. Nevertheless, the young ghetto men continuously reflected "on dominant discourses even when referring to common sense knowledge, whereby these discourses [were] not only acknowledged, but often negotiated and even adjusted” (Willemse 2007:28). The position of ghetto pride was hardly ever explicitly uttered, but it was a ubiquitous subdominant discourse that all of the young men drew from (indicated by terms such as mjanja and kuhustle). I was only able to fully comprehend this by listening and observing with great care, and by simultaneously understanding and unpacking the oppressive powers of the subject position of the ghetto boy and its devastating material effects.

The analytical distinction between a narrative as a text and its context, which is central to the method developed by Willemse (2007), has been helpful when it comes to understanding intertextualities and discovering which extra meanings were brought to the narrative text. Accordingly, I was able to bring out, for instance, the particular significance of the word punk in popular Sheng as compared to international Hip Hop slang, and relate this to the particular ways some young ghetto men imagined ghetto pride. However, without extensive knowledge of the contexts in which these narratives were developed, I could not have applied this method of research and looked for alternative meanings represented in the narrative texts through intertextualities. My long-term and multiple relationships with my research participants, and my long-term experience of working in Mathare, sometimes posed dilemmas, as described in the Introduction. Most of all, however, they have allowed me to both be deeply involved in the lives of my research
participants over many years and gain the knowledge of the contexts and individual life histories that was required to write this book. These relationships also enabled me to extend the process of intersubjective knowledge production to the phase of analysis, because I knew I could count on honest feedback from my research participants on my framings of their narrative texts.

Above all, I hope I have succeeded in bringing out alternative meanings of what it means to be a gang member for young men living in Mathare, and of the role of gangs play in the everyday life of this and other Nairobi ghettos with regard to wider cultural, political and economic frameworks and developments. This in-depth view can enrich gang studies in Kenya, which are still dominated by top-down approaches, and it also has wider implications for gang studies elsewhere.
Bibliography

Aalten, Anna

Abu-Lughod, Lila

Action Aid

Adeagbo, Oluwafemi Atanda & John-Mark IYI,

Ahlberg, Beth Maina & Kezia Muthoni Njoroge

‘Akiwumi Report’

Ako-Nai, Ronke (ed.)

Alam, Afreen, Nisha Baliga, Gesang Deji, et al.

Alim, Samy H., Awad Ibrahim & Alastair Pennycook


Appadurai, Arjun


Barker G. and Ricardo, C.

Bay, Edna G.

BBC
(2006) 'Kenyans flee deadly gang battle.' *BBC News*, 8 November. Available at: 


(2014) 'Who are Somalia’s al-Shabab?’ BBS News, 16 May. Available at: 

Behar, Ruth

Berger Gluck, Sherna, & Daphne Patai (Eds.)

Berman, Bruce & John Lonsdale
Bhabha, Homi

Borland, Katherine

Bosire, Mokaya.

Bourdieu, Pierre


Bourgois, Philippe I.


Boyne, Ian

Bradlow, Benjamin
Sector.’ Sustainable Development Law & Policy: Vol. 11: Iss. 1: Article 17.

Braidotti, Rosi


Branch, Daniel & Nic Cheeseman

Brass, Jennifer N.

Brubaker, Richard.

Butler, Judith


Castells, Manuel

Chege, Michael

Cheeseman, Nic

CHORE
Clough, Marshall S.  

Connell, Raewyn W.  


Covey, Herbert C.  

Dafe, Florence  

Davids, Tine, & Karin Willemse  


De Certeau, Michel  

Derrida, Jacques  

De Vries, Hent & Samuel Weber  
Dogra, Nandita


Elkins, Caroline

Ellis, Amanda, Jozefina Cutura, Nouma Dione et al.

Erikson, Thomas H.

Etherton, David

Fagan, Jeffrey & Richard B. Freeman

Fairclough, Norman


Fengler, Wolfgang

Ferguson, James

Fernandes, Sujatha

Foucault, Michel


Frederiksen, Bodil Folke


Galtung, Johan

GBM

Gecaga, Margaret

Geschiere, Peter

Gettleman, Jeffrey


Ghorashi, Halleh

HRW (Human Rights Watch)

Gibson, Diana & Anita Hardon

Gilroy, Paul

Ianni, F.A. & E. Reuss-Ianna

Githinji, Peter


Githiora, Chege

Gitonga, Antony

243

Githongo, John
(2002) So, Kenyans, don’t hate each other: Violence was political, not tribal. The East African October 21-27.

Glaser, Clive

GoK (Government of Kenya)

Hagedorn, John M.


Haraway, Donna

Harnischfeger, Johannes

Harvey, David

Haugerud, Angelique
Henningsen, Erik & Peris Jones  

Hernández, Graciella  

Hodgson, Dorothy Louise & Sheryl McCurdy  

Hoek-Smit, Marja  

Honwana, Alcinda M.  

Huchzermeyer, Marie  


Huchzermeyer, Marie & Alfred Omenya,  

Hunter, M.  

IMLU


Jacob Rasmussen (2010) 'Mungiki as youth movement: Revolution, gender and generational politics in Nairobi, Kenya' *Young* 18, 3: 301-319.


Kamau, Michael.

Kamau, Richard

Kameri-Mbote, Patricia

Kanogo, Tabitha

Karneworff, A. B.

Kasarani Youth Congress

Kenyatta, Jomo

KHRC (Kenya Human Rights Commission)

KNHRC

(2008b) On the brink of the precipice: A human rights account of Kenya’s Post 2007 elections violence. Available at:
Kiai, Mugambi
(2011) *Extrajudicial killings in Kenya.* Available at:

Kiberenge, Kenfrey

Kiesling, Scott Fabius

Kigochie, Petronella W

Kihato, Caroline Wanjiku
(Forthcoming) 'Go back and tell them who the real men are! Gendering our understanding of Kibera's violence.'

Kimani, Mary
(2009) 'Mobilizing money at the grass roots. Self-help groups in Kenya boost domestic savings and investment.' Africa Renewal. Available at:

Kimuyu, Peter Kiko

King, Stephena.

Kinnes, Irvin
(2000) *From urban street gangs to criminal empires: The changing face of gangs in the*

Kiriamiti, John

Klopp, Jacqueline & Prisca Kamungi

Kristeva, Julie

KTN

Kwamboka, Evelyn

Kweyu, Dorothy

Kynoch, Gary

Lamba, A.

Langness, Lewis L. & Gelya Frank

Lindsay, Lisa A. & Stephan Miescher (eds.)

Lock Swarr, Amanda

Lonsdale, John.


(2008a) Kenya: ethnicity, tribe, and state, 17 January,
http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/democracy_power/kenya_ethnicity_tribe_state (accessed on 19 February 2010).


Lovesey, Oliver

Lundine, Jamie, Primož Kovačič & Lisa Poggialli

Lynch, Gabrielle

Macharia, K

United States of America. Paper prepared for Conference on African Migration in Comparative Perspective, Johannesburg, South Africa, 4-7 June.

Mahmood, Saba

Majiwa, Moreen
(2011) ‘Kazi Kwa Vijana Scandal.’ Mzalendo. Available at:

Majors, Richard & Janet Mancini Billson

Makokha, K.

Marshall-Fratani, Ruth

Masime Jeremiah O., Wanjau Ruth, Murungi Jane & Onindo Charles

Matusitz, J., & Repass, M.

Mathauer, I., J.O. Schmidt & M. Wenyaa

Mazrui, Ali

Mberu, Blessing, Patricia Elungata & Diana Warira
(2013) ‘The fading fad of flying toilets improves health in urban slums.’ *APHRC*. Available at: http://aphrc.org/blog/the-fading-fad-of-flying-toilets-improves-health-in-urban-
slums/ (accessed on 29 November 2014).


Mose, Caroline

Mossink, Marijke

Mueller Susan D.


Muganzi, Zebeon, S.

MUHURI & OSI

Mukinda, Fred

Mungai Mutonya

Murrell, Nathaniel Samuel

Musembi, C. and P. Scott-Villiers

MuST

Mutahi, Patrick

Mutua, Makau

Mwangi, Evans

Muiriru, Billy

Mutinda, Leonard

Mutongi, Kenda

Mwakio, Philip & Stanley Mwahanga

Nelson, Nici
(1978a) ‘Dependence and independence: female household heads in Mathare Valley, a squatter community in Nairobi, Kenya.’


Nencel, Lorraine


Ng’etich, Jacob

Ngoiri Jane & Aggrey Mutambo

Nordstrom, Carolyn

NTA
NTV
(2013) ‘CS Ole Lenku leads chang'aa raid in Mathare.’ NTV news. Available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kb8lriGqPs (accessed on 22 November 2013).

Nyagih, Moses
(2011) ‘Hard times ahead as fuel and food prices soar.’ Standard Media. Available at:

Nzuma, Jonathan Makau
(2013) ‘The political economy of food price policy. The case of Kenya.’ UNU-WIDER,
working Paper No. 2013/026.

Ochieng, Philip

Odhiambo, Walter & Damiano Kulundu Manda
Urban Research Symposium, Washington D.C.

Odula, Tom
Over Raila Odinga.’ The Huffington Post. Available at:

Ogot, Bethewell

Okoth, Oduol Stephen, Simeon Okelo, Fredrick Aila et al.
(2013) ‘Effect of the Youth Enterprise Development Fund on Youth Enterprises in Kenya.’

Okoth-Okombo, Duncan & Olang Sana
(2010) Balaa Mitaani : the challenge of mending ethnic relations in Nairobi slums. Friedrich
Ebert Stiftung: Nairobi.

Ombati, Cyrus.


Ominde, S.

O’Neill, T. & M.J. Hird

Ong, Aihwa

Onyango D.

Ortner, Sherry B.

Oscar Foundation

Otiso, Kefa M.

Otner, Sherry B.


Ries, Nancy


Samper, David A.

Santiso Carlos


Sassen, Saskia

Scheper-Hughes Nancy

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy & Philippe I. Bourgois

Schilderman, Theo & Otto Eriks Ruskulis

Schneider, Friedrich, Andreas Buehn & Claudio E. Montenegro

Schrijvers, Joke

Scott, James C.

Shefer, T., K. Ratele, A. Strebel, N. Shabalala and R. Buikema (eds.)

Silberschmidt, Margrethe


Singerman, Diane

Skeggs, Beverley

Smedt, Johan de

Smith, A.D.

Sommer, Doris

Sommerville, Keith

Spivak, Gayatri Chackravorty

Spronk, Rachel

Star Editor

Star Reporter

Stiglitz, Joseph

Stren, Richard

Strømme Foundation
(2012) ‘We want to further our partnership with MYSA. We want them to have a greater awareness of rights.’ Press Release. Available at: https://strommestiftelsen.no/press-release (accessed on 30 November 2014).

Sullivan, John

Syagga, P.M., W.V. Mitullah and S.K. Gitau

Tamagni, Daniele

The Nation Reporter
(2008) How election violence was financed. The Daily Nation. 27 August.

Thieme, Tatiana
2013 ‘The 'hustle' amongst youth entrepreneurs in Mathare's informal waste economy’. 

Throup, David & Charles Hornsby

Tonkin, Elisabeth

Turner, Terisa E. & Leigh S. Brownhill

Uchendu, Egodi

UNDP

UN-HABITAT

Uzoigwe, G.N.

Van Houtum, Henk & Ton van Naerssen

Van Stapele, Naomi
Vigil, Diego James


Vigh, Henrik


(2009) *Motion Squared. Landscapes, seascapes and a second look at the concept of social navigation*. Seminar paper at ASSR, University of Amsterdam, 9 December.


Wabala, Dominic

Wacquant, Loïc

(2011) 'Habitus as Topic and Tool: Reflections on Becoming a Prizefighter.' *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 8:81–92.

Waikenda, Machel

‘Waki Report’

Wallis, Daniel & Katie Nguyen

264


Willemse, Karin, Ruth Morgan and John Meletse,

Willemse Karin,


WHO
(2009) ‘The influenza outbreak in humans caused by Influenza A/H1N1 - considerations at the human-animal interface’. Available at: 
http://www.who.int/foodsafety/fs_management/No_02_influenza_Apr09_en_rev1.pdf?ua=1 (accessed on 29 November 2014).

World Bank
Summary

This ethnography focuses on the multiple meanings of gangs in the everyday practices of young men in Mathare, a Nairobi ghetto, and analyses these meanings in relation to wider cultural, political, and economic frameworks and developments. In particular, it looks at the daily struggles of young ghetto men who faced multiple marginalities in their attempts to become senior men and how this was related to membership of a working gang. Accordingly, this book aims to move beyond the dominant representations of gangs in Kenya and elsewhere as criminal, political and mono-ethnic networks of idle young men. I thus hope to contribute to debates on gangs in Kenya and worldwide, African masculinities, and articulations of ethnic and local belonging. By looking at what pushed young men to join or leave working gangs, how this was tied to struggles over positions of manhood, and why and how gangs and individual gang members took part in junctures violence, this book goes beyond the stereotypical, but highly pervasive, depiction of these young men as “thugs for hire”. As a consequence, I found that along with the much-researched concept of political violence, which is heavily intertwined with ethnicity in the context of Kenya, other factors like work, gender and belonging turned out be crucial in gaining insight into the social processes of working gang formation in Mathare, and into the participation of these gangs and individual gang members in violence.

The main challenge for my research is understanding why and how young men in Mathare both join and leave working gangs. I launched the term working gang for groups that focused on alcohol production and the drug trade, because the members themselves referred to their income-generating activities as work. Referring to illegal practices in this way is not uncommon among groups that are engaged in them, and it fully captures the notion of "respectable illegality". The young distillers were acutely aware of its illegal status, but they imagined it as reputable as it enabled them to perform (young) male duties and earn respect from community residents. The most obvious reason for young men in this ghetto to joining a working gang seems to emanate from economic necessity. Nevertheless, such explanations risk reducing complex social motivations and decision-making processes to monetary logics. I have tried to develop a broader view of the current and future social possibilities and constraints that young men imagined when making decisions and acting on them, especially pertaining to joining and leaving working gangs. All young men who featured in this book were driven by a shared desire to improve their social status and actualise the position of senior manhood. This predominantly shaped their social navigation trajectories, within which both joining and leaving working gangs were considered to be key steps. Accordingly, I show that the social processes of working gang formation in Mathare were predominantly shaped by notions of work and dominant standards of masculinity, rather than by ethnicity or political affiliations. Ethnicity did play a role as a boundary marker in many other group-making projects that also involved working gang members from time to time, albeit in highly unexpected ways.
Especially striking was the role of working gangs in structuring the processes of becoming men in a community that was dominated by women. These processes were popularly imagined as following the gradual attainment of specific social, cultural and economic capital. One of the main pathways to gradually achieving such ambitions was by joining a working gang, as these gangs were popularly conceptualised as age-sets that helped young men to progress from junior to senior manhood. Most young men moved out of their family’s one-room house after circumcision at the age of 16 to begin life as a junior man. Working gangs allowed young men to cater for and garner adequate capital with which to eventually establish themselves as senior men. The working gang also enabled these young men to maintain meaningful relationships with their families by working for close female relatives and performing security and other forms of community service in their neighbourhood area. Interestingly, notions of work, respectability and community service are not generally associated with gangs in the dominant discourses, whether in Kenya or worldwide. I, however, focused on the everyday role of gangs in ghettos, and studying these groups from local viewpoints revealed the fluidity and overlap between gangs and between gangs and other social groups of young men such as football teams, youth groups and even CBOs. This view thus helped me to approach the experiential level of the social processes of working gang formation, and to go beyond representations that prevail in both the media and academia. Accordingly, this perspective highlighted the quite different roles of gangs and gang members in the local setting.

This book shows that it is imperative to include gangs in sub-Saharan African ghettos in the emerging global agenda of comparative gang studies. However, gender is not a new trope in gang studies. Nevertheless, the roles of women as bosses and ‘cheerleaders’ of gangs of young men, and how this has a bearing on the latter’s imaginings of gendered senses of the self, which is so central in this study, give new dimensions to the role of gender in this field. Moreover, the modes in which gangs play a role in and structure situational and relational processes of becoming men requires further academic exploration. These emphases are all the more urgent in a global context that is currently witnessing rapid urbanisation (particularly in southern countries), an increasingly younger population, and a growing number of households led by single mothers. The declining access to opportunities for young men within the formal realm in the global south calls for in-depth analyses of how the self-organisation among young men within informal economies can often become quite productive in terms of economic growth, social cohesion and community development, to the extent that it may even benefit the so-called formal economy. Having said this, I also illustrate that clear distinctions between formal and informal and legal and illegal are in fact hard to make.

Despite the fact that gangs offered work opportunities to young ghetto men, they were expected to leave the working gang and establish themselves as senior men around the age of 30 at the latest. However, leaving a gang has become increasingly difficult in recent times. This book brings out how this had an impact on the already tense gender relations in Mathare, and how young men navigated these shifts. I describe how, during their gang membership, these young men became fathers, got married (not necessarily in
that order) and gradually took up other positions that were widely associated with senior manhood. Nevertheless, gang members were never fully considered to be senior men in the popular discourse as long as they continued to be part of the gang. The founding of the first alcohol gangs in Mathare in 1994, and later the drug gangs in the early 2000s, helped young men to carve out pathways for themselves to garner social and other types of capital that would help them to leave the gang. However, the economic slump after 2008 increasingly hindered their trajectories out of the gang, thus trapping gang members in a more permanent state of 'lesser manhood'. Accordingly, anxieties about manhood among both men and women put mounting pressure on gender relations in Mathare, and relationships between women and young men in particular became more and more unhinged.

A major thread running through this book is how these young men’s fears of growing redundancy with regard to women shaped their social navigation struggles. These men may best be described by the term ‘anxious men’, referring to those who feared becoming lesser men, *mafala*. Their anxieties do not, however, indicate that young men were locally considered to be redundant or disconnected; instead, it denoted the qualms that young men had about losing more and more social, political and economic ground in relation to their community and society at large, but especially with regard to the women in their lives. I explore how and why, from the perspectives of young men, the recent economic decline affected the two genders differently in Mathare. Most young men thus felt increasingly left out. Furthermore, their anxieties were profoundly aggravated by the unlawful killings of young ghetto men by the police that have become a systematic phenomenon since 2002. I discuss in detail, and from different perspectives, how the double bind of depending on women for work and being expected to provide for women led to mounting anxieties among young ghetto men. Engaging in direct acts of violence was, to a large extent, aimed at forcing a shift in the, in their eyes, oppressive and anomalous gender relations. Dominant media representations often depicted these men as detached, idle, frustrated and prone to violence, and therefore a threat. Contrary to such perceptions, engaging in violent strategies was more often than not aimed at reinforcing their sense of belonging to their family and community. Regarding their participation in such violence as strategic, and as part of their social navigation struggles, enabled a view that held these men as agents instead of mere victims of power configurations.

My focus on working gangs also became crucial for acquiring better insight into the rise and demise of ethnic-based gangs and into understanding mounting violence in Mathare from the early 2000s onwards. Nearly all direct acts of violence emanated from routine violence that structurally marginalised different social groups in Mathare. Dominant ethnic hate narratives at times gained performative power among these different groups in attempts to comprehend disparities between them. This book reveals that some working gang members shifted gang alliances during conflict, hence boosting ethnic-based gangs during critical moments. At other times, however, working gangs teamed up with local residents to oust ethnic-based gangs. Working gangs and individual members thus participated in conflicts that involved ethnic-based gangs in unexpected ways, and this
brings important nuances to the dominant narrative in Kenya that explains the mounting violence in Mathare solely in ethnic terms.

This book also shows that in order to fully understand why and how episodes of violence emerge in this ghetto, and perhaps elsewhere, it is crucial to examine the historical, social, economic and political factors that come together in a particular locality at a particular moment in time. It is vital to investigate these elements from the perspectives of the people (such as working gang members) involved in such violence, whether as perpetrators, victims, or both. To understand this violence from the viewpoint of its participants, the context-bound histories of ethnic labels and how these intersected with popular notions of belonging and entitlement were crucial. Discourses about ethnic labels thus imagined were politically strategic constructs; the people who were supposed to belong to these constructs and reap the consequences, whether they wanted to or not, such as the poor with Kikuyu and Luo backgrounds, hardly ever fitted them. In their narratives, the young men increasingly imagined violence in terms of ‘us Kikuyu’ and ‘them Luo’ and vice versa. I argued that these ethnic labels hide more than they reveal and cannot be used as an explanatory concept on their own. The young men who killed and died in the name of an ethnic label turned out to actually know very little about the dominant history of those constructs, or about past social relationships between the particular ethnic groups to which they refer.

The trope of the jealous neighbour was often evoked by working gang members (and residents in general) to explain all kinds of conflict in Mathare. This notion proved to be useful in this research for unravelling how, when and why conflicts emerged, because it added an often overlooked dimension of violence in Mathare, albeit one that is well understood by local residents. The dimensions described by this image included both the power of jealousy (emanating from feeling excluded) and the opportunity that violence may provide to improve one’s own position. The notion of the jealous neighbour has helped in unpacking different layers of the reasons behind participation in, and the meanings of, violence in Mathare from the perspective of young ghetto men. Accordingly, approaching such seemingly conflicting and potentially conflictive relationships called for an in-depth contextualisation of such relationships and their shifts. Through such analyses, and by following the logic of young working gang members, I have been able to bring into view their ostensibly contradictory and highly fluid positions during conflicts. I thus discovered another layer to the binary between popular positions of manhood, mjanja and fala. These positions intersected with notions of natives and visitors in unexpected ways, and this again helped me to bring nuance to the dominant trope of ethnicity.

The theoretical framework of social navigation (Vigh 2006, 2009) enabled me to bring out how young men, despite situations of extreme insecurity, continued to build their lives against all odds. This approach did, however, fall short when it came to elucidating how their considerations of the immediate and the imagined pertained to differences in choice-making among similarly positioned men, and how this all had a bearing on individual social navigation struggles. I have tried to overcome the limits posed by this framework by analysing the young men's life histories against the grain. Looking at
processes of subjectivation from the perspectives of the young men led me to focus on their 'negotiation' of discourses. The different ways in which these young men negotiated restrictive subject positions shaped different social navigation trajectories among them. This focus has also helped to highlight the availability of particular alternative positions such as ghetto pride. Accordingly, the concept of negotiation has added to social navigation theory in crucial ways. It allowed me to analyse how individual young men positioned themselves within the context of the highly restrictive forces that moved all of them. Looking at their processes of negotiation enabled me to approach the different modalities in which young ghetto men navigated social relationships and highly unstable circumstances.

Analysing the process of negotiation through the narratives of young ghetto men made their social navigation struggles detectable to me from their own points of view. This type of discourse analysis was useful in grasping intersubjective patterns of individual experiences, and as such of situated and embodied histories and agencies. These patterns were not generalisable in absolute terms, but they did shed light on dominant and available alternative discursive frameworks and their mediated effects within particular spatial, temporal and social contexts. This enabled me to approach how some of these men were, at times, able to claim power and resist oppressive structures, however fleetingly, by constructing the position of ghetto pride. It also allowed me to contextualise ethnicity by analysing contingent notions of us and them based on shifting articulations of local and ethnic belonging from their perspectives.

In this book, a concept of agency came to the fore that encompassed the situational relationalities between structure and actor, and which included acts of both compliance and resistance (Davids and Willemse 2014). The different modes in which young ghetto men negotiated dominant discourses, at times upholding while at other times challenging dominant notions and subject positions, revealed that affirming dominant subject positions could also indicate instances of agency. This begs the question as to under which conditions the upholding of a dominant subject position may allude to agency (see also Mahmood 2005). Kingi and many other young men in this book were highly invested in adhering to the position of the provider, and even during times of great adversity they took immense pride in at least trying to live up to this masculine ideal. As a consequence, it was not just in succeeding, but also in trying, that agency manifested itself. Interestingly, this type of struggling and hustling (dubbed by them *kung’ang’ana* – Kiswahili for ‘to struggle’ – or *kuhustle* in Sheng) perhaps affirmed one subject position, but also helped to, at times, resist another. Enacting the role of provider, even against all odds, was also part of enacting ghetto pride and resisting the ghetto boy position, as it underscored their identification as men instead of boys.

Above all, I hope this book brings out alternative meanings of what it means to be a gang member for young men living in Mathare, and of the role of gangs play in the everyday life of this and other Nairobi ghettos with regard to wider cultural, political and economic frameworks and developments. This in-depth view can enrich gang studies in Kenya, which
are still dominated by top-down approaches, and it also has wider implications for gang studies elsewhere.
Samenvatting

Deze monografie gaat over de verschillende betekenissen van gangs in de context van alledaagse praktijken van jongen mannen in Mathare, een ghetto in Nairobi. Het analyseert deze betekenissen in relatie tot bredere culturele, politieke en economische kaders, processen en ontwikkelingen. Dit boek kijkt met name naar de alledaagse worstelingen van jongen mannen uit de ghetto die meervoudige uitdagingen op hun pad tegenkwamen in hun pogingen om senior men te worden, en onderzoekt hoe dit verband hield met het lid worden van een gang. Op deze manier probeert dit boek verder te gaan dan de dominante representaties van gangs in Kenya, en wereldwijd, als criminele, politieke en/of mono-etnische organisaties. Ik hoop hiermee bij te dragen aan debatten over gangs in Kenya en wereldwijd, over mannelijkheid in Afrika en over articulaties van *ethnic and local belonging*. Door te kijken naar wat jonge mannen dreef om lid te worden van gangs, of juist om deze te verlaten, hoe deze processen gelinkt waren aan worstelingen over mannelijkheid, en waarom en hoe gangs en gangeden deelnamen aan geweld, gaat dit boek voorbij aan het stereotypische maar zeer hardnekkige beeld in Kenya van deze jonge mannen als "thugs for hire". Als gevolg kwam ik erachter dat naast het reeds veelvuldig onderzochte concept ‘politiek geweld’, dat nauw verband houdt met etniciteit in de Keniaanse context, andere factoren als werk, gender en *belonging* de sleutel vormden om inzicht te krijgen in de sociale processen van *working gang* formaties in Mathare, en in de participatie van deze groepen en individuen in momenten van geweld.

De belangrijkste uitdaging van mijn onderzoek is te begrijpen waarom en hoe jonge mannen lid worden van *working gangs* en how en waarom zij deze gangs ook weer verlaten. Ik gebruik de term *working gangs* voor groepen die georganiseerd waren rondom met name illegale alcohol productie en distributie en drugs handel, omdat de leden van deze groepen zelf de term werk gebruikte om te refereren aan hun economische activiteiten. Het noemen van illegale praktijken als werk is niet ongebruikelijk onder groepen die hierbij betrokken zijn, en dit onderstreept volledig het begrip ‘respectable *illegality*’. De jonge alcohol stokers waren zich wel degelijk bewust van de illegale status, maar zij conceptualiseren het als respectabel omdat het hen in staat stelde om aan hun mannelijke plichten te voldoen en respect te krijgen van mede buurtbewoners. De meest voor de hand liggende reden dat jonge mannen uit de *ghetto* zich aansluiten bij *working gangs* lijkt voort te komen uit economische noodzaak. Dit soort verklaringen dreigen alleen complexe sociale motiaties en besluitvormingsprocessen te reduceren tot monetaire logica. Ik heb geprobeerd een bredere kijk te ontwikkelen op actuele en toekomstige kansen en belemmeringen die jonge mannen onderhandelen tijdens het maken van besluiten, met name waar het gaat om lid worden van een gang en om deze weer te verlaten.

Alle jonge mannen die in dit boek voorkomen werden gedreven door een gedeeld verlangen om hun sociale status te verbeteren en de positie van *senior manhood* te
actualiseren. Dit vormde grotendeels hun social navigation trajecten, waarin zowel lid worden van een gang als deze weer verlaten als belangrijke stappen werden gezien. Ik laat zien in dit boek dat de sociale processen van working gang formatie voornamelijk werden gevormd door noties van werk en dominante standarden van mannelijkheid, en niet als eerste door ethiciteit en politieke betrekkingen. Etniciteit speelde wel een rol als markering van grenzen in vele andere projecten van groepsvorming, alleen op hele onverwachte wijze. Vooral opvallend was de rol van working gangs in het structureren van processen van ‘man worden’ in een gemeenschap die werd gedomineerd door vrouwen. Deze processen werden over het algemeen voorgesteld als het geleidelijk verkrijgen van specifiek sociaal, cultureel en economisch kapitaal. Een van de belangrijkste wegen om deze ambities te realiseren was het lid worden van een working gang. Deze gangs werden gezien in Mathare als age-sets die jonge mannen in staat stelden om de overgang te maken van junior naar senior manhood. De meeste jonge mannen begonnen met op zichzelf wonen nadat ze besneden waren op 16-jarige leeftijd. Working gangs stelden hen in staat om voor zichzelf te zorgen en stapsgewijs het nodige kapitaal te ontwikkelen waardoor zij uiteindelijk de status van senior men konden bereiken. Deze gang stelden hen ook in staat om relaties te onderhouden met hun families en buurt, bv. doordat zij voor vrouwelijke familieleden werken, en door het bewaken van de veiligheid in de buurt en andere vormen van community service. Noties van werk, respectabiliteit en community service worden niet snel geassocieerd met gangs in dominante discoursen in Kenia of wereldwijd. Echter, de focus in dit boek op de alledaagse rol van gangs bracht juist de vloeibaarheid en overlap tussen gangs en tussen gangs en andere sociale groepen van jonge mannen (zoals voetbal teams, jongerengroepen en zelfs CBOs) naar voren.

 Dit lokale perspectief stelde mij in staat om processen van gang formatie te begrijpen op basis van de ervaringen van leden, en op deze manier verder te gaan dan dominante representaties die nog steeds gangbaar zijn in media en de academie. Hierdoor worden in dit onderzoek hele verschillende rollen van gangs belicht in de lokale setting. Dit boek laat vooral zien hoe belangrijk het is om gangs in sub-Sahara Afrikaanse ghettos te betrekken in de opkomende internationale agenda van vergelijkend onderzoek naar gangs. Gender is niet een nieuwe trope in gang studies. Daarentegen geeft de rol van vrouwen als bazen en ‘cheerleaders’ van gangs van jonge mannen, en hoe dit hun mannelijk zelfbeeld beïnvloedde, nieuwe dimensies aan de rol van gender in dit veld. Ook de manieren waarop gangs een rol speelden in situationale en relationele processen van ‘man worden’ en deze structureerden behoeft meer academisch onderzoek. Deze accenten zijn des te meer urgent in een context van wereldwijde urbanisatie (met name in het ‘Zuiden’), een steeds jongere populatie en steeds meer alleenstaande moeders. De afnemende toegang van jonge mannen tot werk en andere kansen binnen de formele sector in het ‘Zuiden’ vraagt om meer inzicht over de zelforganisatie binnen de informele economie en hoe deze vaak productief is in termen van economische groei, sociale cohesie en buurt- en gemeenschapsontwikkeling. Dit boek laat zien dat gangs mogelijk zelfs bijdragen aan groei binnen de formele sector. Dit gezegd hebbende, dit boek laat ook zien dat een hard onderscheid tussen formeel en informeel en legaal en illegaal nauwelijks te maken valt.
Ondanks het feit dat gangs werk boden aan leden, werd er ook van de leden verwacht dat zij de gang rond hun 30ste weer zouden verlaten om zichzelf te vestigen als senior men. Echter, de gang verlaten werd steeds moeilijker in recente tijden. In dit onderzoek breng ik naar voren welke invloed dit heeft op de reeds gespannen gender relaties in Mathare, en hoe de jonge mannen deze veranderingen naveerden. Ik beschrijf hoe, tijdens lidmaatschap, deze jongens vader werden, trouwden en geleidelijk aan ook andere posities innamen die werden geassocieerd met senior manhood. Desondanks werden gangleden niet beschouwd als senior men zolang ze onderdeel bleven van de gang. Zoals gezegd, hielp de vestiging van de eerste alcohol gangs in Mathare in 1994, en later de drugs gangs, jonge mannen om steeds meer kapitaal te vergaren om de gang te verlaten. De economische crisis vanaf 2008 riep dit echter een halt toe. Steeds meer mannen werden gehinderd in hun traject omdat ze niet economisch onafhankelijk konden worden van de gang, waardoor zij gevangen raakten in een min of meer permanente positie van ‘lesser manhood’. Angst over de kwijnende posities van jonge mannen in Mathare, gedeeld door zowel vrouwen en mannen, legde grote druk op gender relaties, en met name de relaties tussen vrouwen en jonge mannen werd steeds problematischer.

Een rode draad in dit boek wordt gevormd door de angst van jonge mannen uit Mathare om steeds minder belangrijk te worden, met name in relatie tot vrouwen, en deze vrees vormde een belangrijke drijfveer in hun social navigation worstelingen. De term ‘angstige mannen’ benadert goed het gevoel dat de mannen hadden om overbodig te worden en daardoor lesser men, oftewel mafala. Hun angsten kunnen niet als een indicatie dat deze mannen ook werden gezien als overbodig door vrouwen in hun omgeving; integendeel, het benadrukt de zorgen die mannen hadden om hun sociale, economische en politie positie te verliezen binnen de gemeenschap en samenleving. Ik analyseer hoe en waarom, vanuit de perspectieven van de jonge mannen, de recente economische neergang verschillende effecten had voor mannen en vrouwen in Mathare. De meeste jonge mannen voelden zich steeds meer in de steek gelaten. Tegelijkertijd werden hun angsten om overbodig te worden vergroot door het feit dat zoveel jonge mannen werden doodgeschoten door de politie. Ik bespreek in detail en vanuit verschillende perspectieven hoe de afhankelijk zijn van en tegelijkertijd verantwoordelijk zijn voor vrouwen bijdroeg aan deze groeiende angst onder jonge mannen in Mathare. Meedoen aan geweldsacties waren dan ook veelal gericht op het forceren van een doorbraak in de, in hun ogen, onderdrukkende en afwijkende gender verhoudingen. Dominante media representeerden deze mannen vaak af als ongebonden, gefrustreerd en geneigd tot geweld, en dus als een bedreiging. In tegenstelling tot deze stereotypes was juist hun betrokkenheid in geweld vaak gericht om hun gevoel van erbij horen, bij familie en gemeenschap, juist te versterken. Deze kijk legt ook meer nadruk op de agency van deze jonge mannen omdat het de zogenaamde manipuleerbaarheid (door bv. politieke machten) van jonge mannen in geweld nuanceert.

Mijn focus op working gangs geeft ook beter inzicht in de opkomst en neergang van ethnic-based gangs en het toenemende geweld van de afgelopen 10 jaar. Bijna al deze vormen van geweld kwamen voort uit routine violence waardoor verschillende groepen
structureel gemarginaliseerd werden. Dominante vertogen van haat over bepaalde etnische groepen kregen betekenis onder bepaalde groepen door hun rekbaar inzetbaarheid om bepaalde verschillen tussen groepen te verklaren. Dit boek laat zien dat working gangs steeds veranderende verbintenissen aangingen met ethnic-based gangs tijdens periodes van geweld, terwijl tijdens andere momenten deze gangs juist ethnic-based gangs, in samenwerking met andere lokale inwoners, wegjoegen uit de buurt. Dit laat zien dat working gangs en leden waren betrokken bij geweld tussen ethnic-based gangs op onvoorziene wijze, en dit brengt een belangrijke nuance aan in dominante analyses over geweld in Mathare dat vooral gebaseerd is op etniciteit.

Dit onderzoek laat ook zien dat om geweld in Mathare te begrijpen het belangrijk is om te kijken naar de historisch, sociale, economische en politieke factoren die op een bepaald moment en in een bepaalde ruimte samenkomen. Het is zelfs van vitaal belang om deze elementen vanuit het perspectief van betrokkenen te analyseren, en zo boven de dichotomie van slachtoffers en daders uit te stijgen. Om vormen van geweld vanuit het perspectief van betrokkenen te vatten bleek het cruciaal om te kijken hoe, in de vertellingen en ervaringen van de jonge mannen, de context-gebonden geschiedenissen van etnische categorieën kruisten met populaire noties van belonging en toebehoren. Vertogen over deze verbeelde categorieën waren politiek strategische constructen; mensen die werden verondersteld te behoren tot deze categorieën pasten deze vrijwel nooit. De jonge mannen in dit boek verbeeldde toch het geweld in toenemende mate in termen van ‘ons Kikuyu’ tegen ‘hen Luo’, en andersom. Ik beargumenteer dat deze termen meer verbergen dan laten zien, en nooit kunnen worden gebruikt om geweld één-dimensionaal te verklaren, zoals vaak wel gebeurt. De jonge mannen die doodden en stierven in de naam van deze categorieën hadden in feite weinig weet van de dominante geschiedenissen van deze constructen, of van de sociale en historische relaties tussen specifieke etnische groepen waar deze aan refereerden. Hoe kunnen we dit geweld dan beter verklaren?

De jonge mannen, en bijna iedereen in Mathare, riep vaak het beeld van de ‘jaloerse buur’ op om allerlei conflicten te verklaren. Deze notie bleek zeer relevant om bepaalde dimensies die vaak over het hoofd worden gezien beter in zicht te krijgen; d.w.z. de kracht van jaloezie en de kansen die geweld met zich mee kan brengen (naast vernietiging en gevaar). De notie van de ‘jaloerse buur’ hielp in het begrijpen van de gelaagdheid van motivaties voor mensen om deel te nemen aan geweld, en hierdoor ook andere betekenissen van geweld vanuit het perspectief van betrokkenen. Het analyseren en contextualiseren van steeds veranderende buurt relaties tussen groepen en individuen gebaseerd op de zienswijze van de jonge mannen stelde mij in staat om hun ogenschijnlijke contrasterende en zeer vloeibare posities tijdens conflicten aan het licht te brengen. Ik ‘ontdekte’ op deze manier een volgende laag binnen de schijnbaar tegenovergestelde posities van mannelijkheid, mjanja en fala. Deze posities werden op verschillende manieren doorkruist door noties van natives en visitors, en ook dit hielp in het verder nuanceren van het dominante vertoog over etniciteit in relatie tot sociale en politieke ontwikkelingen, waaronder geweld.
Het theoretische kader van *social navigation* (Vigh 2006, 2009) bracht naar voren hoe jonge mannen, ondanks extreme onzekerheid, toch doorzetten met het opbouwen van hun levens. Deze benadering verklaarde alleen niet waarom en hoe hun beschouwingen, van het hier en nu en van de toekomst, in verband stonden met verschillende keuzes onder mannen die op een zelfde manier gepositioneerd waren binnen structurele kaders. Ik heb geprobeerd om deze beperking van dit theoretische kader te ontstijgen door het analyseren van hun levensverhalen *against the grain*. Het analyseren van deze onderhandelingsprocessen heeft bijgedragen aan het voorgenoemde theoretische kader door zicht te geven op hoe jonge mannen zich positioneerden binnen de context van zeer restrictieve contexten. Hierdoor kon ik licht schijnen op de verschillende manieren hoe jonge mannen de dominante subject posities onderhandelden en hoe dit eventueel verschillende *social navigation* trajecten voortbracht onder hen. Deze focus hielp ook om de beschikbaarheid van alternatieve subject posities aan het licht te brengen.

Het analyseren van de levensverhalen en te kijken naar hoe de jonge mannen dominante discoursen onderhandelden maakte hun *social navigation* worstelingen beter te begrijpen vanuit hun eigen perspectieven. Dit type discourse analyse is zeer bruikbaar om intersubjectieve patronen van individuele ervaringen aan het licht te brengen, en op deze manier *situated* en belichaamde geschiedenissen en *agencies* te analyseren. Deze patronen zijn niet zo maar te generaliseren, maar ze schijnen licht op de dominante en alternatieve discursieve kaders en diens gemedieerde effecten binnen bepaalde ruimtelijke, tijdelijke en sociale contexten. Hierdoor kon ik benaderen waarom sommige mannen in staat waren om macht te claimen en zich te verzetten tegen dominante subject posities, bv. door het construeren van de positie *ghetto pride*, hoe tijdelijk en vluchtig dit ook was. Dit gaf ook belangrijke contextualisering, gebaseerd op hun eigen perspectief, van etniciteit als verklarend concept omdat het gelaagde analyses voortbracht van de constant verschuivende articulaties van ‘ons’ en ‘zij’ die waren gebaseerd op hele verschillende en steeds veranderende invullingen en intersecties van *local and ethnic belonging*.

In dit boek komt een concept van agency naar voren dat de situationele relaties tussen structuur en actor betrekt in analyses, waarin zowel verzet als het navolgen van dominante subject posities als onderdeel van agency kan worden beschouwd (Davids en Willemsen 2014). De verschillende manieren waarop jonge mannen de dominante discoursen onderhandelden in dit boek geeft aan dat er ook agency kan schuilen in het zogenaamd bevestigen van dominante subject posities. Dit roept om verdere theoretische analyse over de vraag onder welke omstandigheden het navolgen van een dominante subject positie naar agency kan verwijzen (Mahmood 2005). Kingi en vele andere mannen in deze studie investeerden enorm veel in het navolgen van de ‘*provider*’, en zelfs tijdens extreme crisis haalden zij trots uit het feit dat zij het in ieder geval probeerden. Dientengevolge, zat agency niet alleen in het bereiken van dit ideaal, maar ook in het nastreven ervan. Dit type ‘hustling’ (in Sheng) bevestigde weliswaar één dominante subject positie, maar stelden hen ook in staat om zich te verzetten tegeneen andere dominante subject positie, namelijk die van ‘ghetto boy’.
Bovenal, hoop ik dat dit boek alternatieve betekenissen naar voren brengt van wat het betekent om lid te zijn van een gang voor jonge mannen in Mathare, Nairobi. Dit onderzoek geeft een ander beeld van de verschillende rollen van gangs in het dagelijks leven van deze en andere Nairobi ghettos, zeker als het gaat om bredere culturele, politieke en economische kaders en ontwikkelingen. De diepgaande analyses in dit boek kunnen gang studies in Kenya verrijken omdat deze nog steeds worden gedomineerd door een top-down benadering, en ze hebben ook vernieuwende implicaties voor gang studies wereldwijd omdat het zeer specifieke vragen oproept over gender en de rol van gangs in zogenaamde ‘informele’ economieën.